
E3 PREVIEW WHO'S GOING TO WIN IN LA?
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PS4 AND XBOX ONE AMAZING NEW GAMES
BETHESDA OPENS UP
SAVING ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE
The team's plan to reinvent the MMO
SAMSUNG
THE VR VERDICT
DEFINITIVE HANDS-ON REPORT
WHY IT WORKS AND WHY YOU'LL WANT IT
PROJECT MORPHEUS • OCULUS RIFT • SAMSUNG GEAR • HTC VIVE
MARVEL SPECIAL
COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE AVENGERS
The gaming history of Marvel's greatest team
TIM SCHAFER EXCLUSIVE
10 YEARS OF PSYCHONAUTS
We enter the mind of Double Fine visionary
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ISSUE 160
HIGHLIGHTS
RAINBOW SIX: SIEGE ■ FABLE LEGENDS ■ UNREAL TOURNAMENT ■ AXIOM VERGE
LEGO JURASSIC PARK ■ ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES ■ BATTLEFIELD HARDLINE
BLOODBORNE ■ ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST ■ PILLARS OF ETERNITY ■ CROWFALL

We probably don't acknowledge it very often, but the games industry is actually a pretty great place for second chances. There aren't very many industries out there that will return to an idea that appears to have failed or at least not been terribly successful and say 'Let's give that another try'. It comes to mind now because we're seeing so many different technologies and models being given a chance. Virtual reality is the biggest of these, of course, and having lived through the debacle of Virtual Boy and the mild VR arcade craze, I never would have thought it would get a second chance, let alone be the most exciting new field of gaming since Nintendo revealed the Wii remote.

But I'm also drawn to the commitment of Microsoft to experimental games or 'risky' ideas like free-to-play. That's almost like doubling down on a niche concept as you take a premise that may not work and release it in a way destined to annoy plenty of people whether they play it or not. The payoff, though, is if people do like it, there's no reason for them to skip it when it's free. *Killer Instinct* didn't prove that out just yet, but maybe *Fable Legends* will.

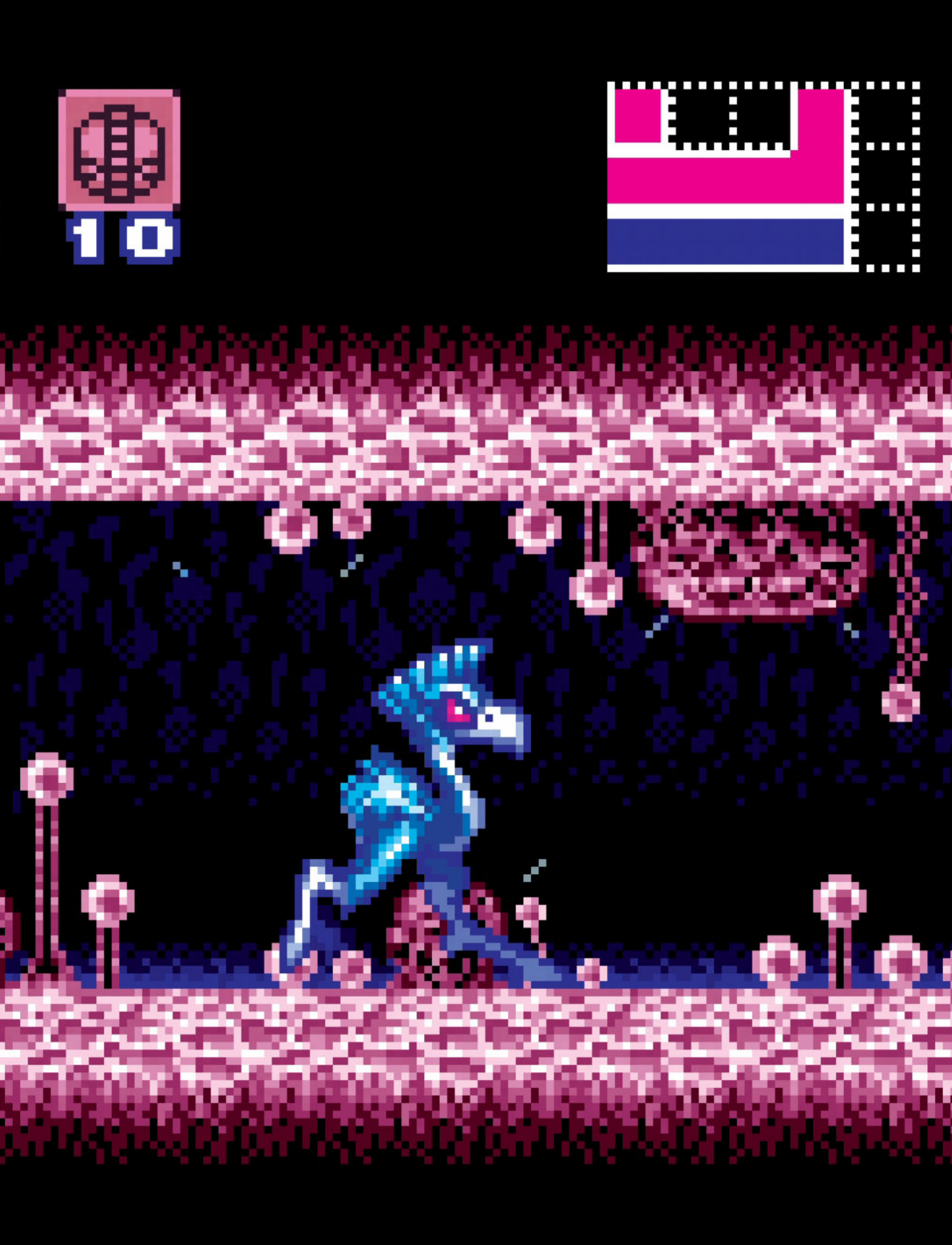
Either way it's nice to see we haven't given up on every vaguely off-the-wall idea just yet.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




AUTO
ENERGY 160
065
15


10

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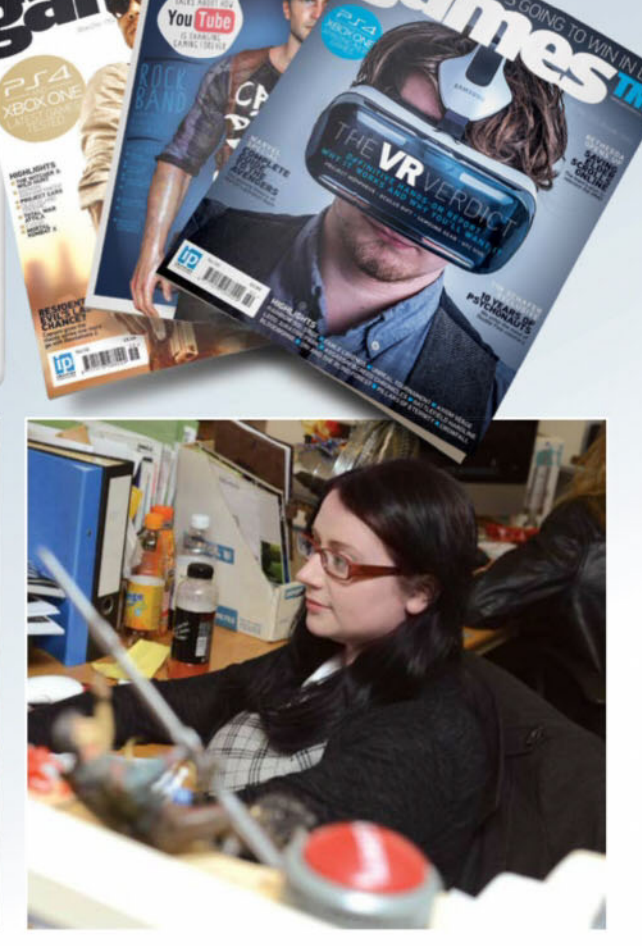
Hi there. The **games™** team is a dedicated one and we know as one of our readers you're just as committed to **games™** as we are. With that in mind this year we want to make the magazine even better with your help. Simply answer a few questions, and you could be selected to join our first ever **games™** panel. I'm looking forward to reading your ideas and feedback.



Jonathan Gordon
Editor



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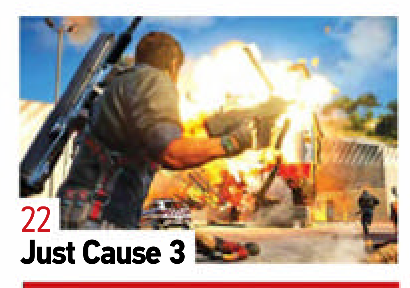


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Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 160 | 15


22
Just Cause 3

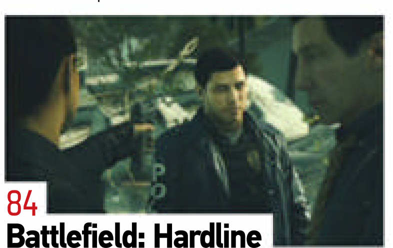
PREVIEWS


38
Lego Jurassic World

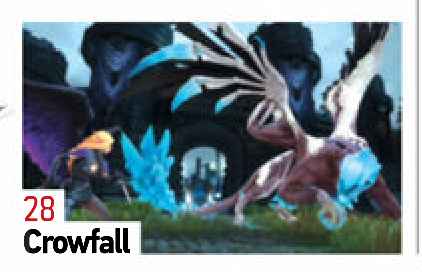
FAVOURITES



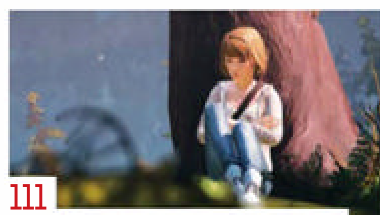
DISCUSS


84
Battlefield: Hardline

RETRO


28
Crowfall

REVIEWS


111
Life Is Strange: Episode 2

FEATURES


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Turn to page 80
46 Feature
THE VR VERDICT
Find out what we learnt from our extensive hands-on with the latest virtual reality tech

Discuss

(LET THE EXCLUSIVES ARMS RACE BEGIN)

Who Needs A Big E3 The Most?

→ Sony steamed ahead of competitors last year – the PS4's launch bowled over Europe and got the edge in the States. On the eve of E3, who has taken the lead? **games**™ investigates…



So, at the time of writing, it's been 18 months since the current generation of videogames consoles kicked off. We saw Microsoft stumble at the first hurdle with a disastrous PR campaign and more U-turns than a modern British government. Sony seized the initiative, leaving its competitors in the dust, only slowing down to oil the legs of its unstoppable sales machine. In Europe, Sony was matching every Xbox One sale with four sold-through PS4 units, giving the tech giant a *huge* edge over its rivals.



Above *Zelda* is Nintendo's biggest weapon, and the open world Wii U title in development seems to be the only thing people want from the publisher this year.

In fact, since launch, the PS4 has been responsible for $3 *billion* (just over £2 billion) of Sony's profits, making it – by far – the most successful arm of the company's tech endeavours. Microsoft hasn't kept its head in the sand since last E3, though – in fact, at the time of writing, the company had just slashed the price of the Xbox One by roughly $50, and as a result saw a rise in sales of 84% month-on-month (according to the NPD Group).

Nintendo and its handhelds and home consoles continue to defy all logic, selling ridiculous numbers across the globe despite

DATA STREAM → XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVE QUANTUM BREAK HAS BEEN RESCHEDULED FOR 2016

Contents

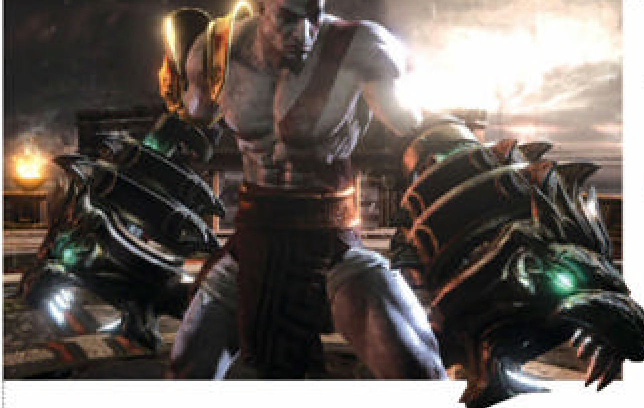
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Above *God Of War*'s been mysteriously quiet recently, but if Sony brought that forward for the PS4, it could give the publisher a decent boost.

a low install base and a myopic approach to audience targeting. Hardcore handheld *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* managed to ship an incredible 290,000 in its first week on sale, and *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D* managed to hit 500,000 sales only three weeks after its general release. For context, *Zelda* outsold everything else in gaming over February. That's good news for the upcoming Wii U-only *Zelda* game, surely?

Well, it depends. We've got E3 coming up around the corner, and you can't underestimate how important the annual gaming showcase is to this industry. The Big Three are already moving behind the scenes, making announcement plans, trailers, demos and all sorts, ready for the June. Nintendo has forsaken the traditional E3 template, though, preferring to simply reveal its assets directly to its audience with a series of Nintendo Direct shows.

> "PS4 remains the cumulative leader in hardware sales with more than 20.2 million units sold to consumers worldwide"
>
> Sony statement

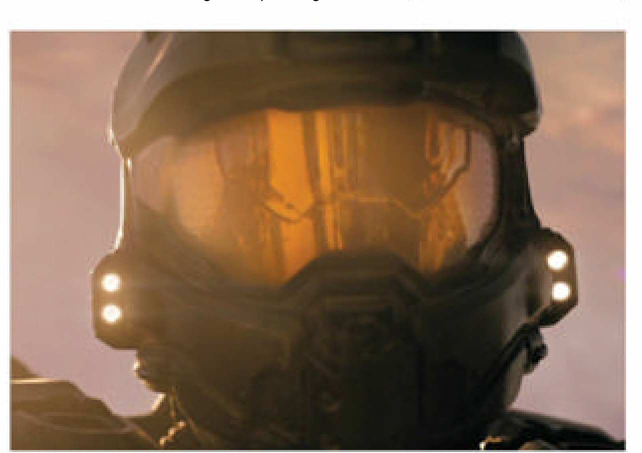
So what can we expect – are Microsoft and Sony going to put on such a ridiculous show that Nintendo's more subtle approach is overshadowed, or will the Japanese giant do what it did last year, and somehow manage to steal a lot of the limelight, despite its general absence from the show? It's clear that Microsoft needs to create the biggest buzz this year; the Xbox One may have picked up sales thanks to the dropping price point, but moves like that don't create sales traction for long. Xbox will see a steep drop-off again before E3, and only a presser full of the biggest, shiniest new exclusives will convince gamers not already part of the new generation to adopt the Xbox over Sony's console.

After all, we've already seen most of our friends (and a lot of you readers) migrate from a 360 past to a PS4 future. You can't underestimate how important an active friends list is in the modern console age.

WE KNOW FOR a fact Microsoft will be showing *Halo 5: Guardians* – it's the console's biggest upcoming title. 343 Industries and Microsoft have already begun an alternate-reality game centred around the lore of *Guardians*, named *Hunt The Truth*. Combining innovative PR campaigns like that with (we hope) some actual gameplay footage and hands-on experiences will certainly renew our faith in *Halo*… because let's be honest, The *Master Chief Collection* did as much PR harm to the brand as it did good.

Otherwise, Microsoft needs to drop a few surprises in to really evoke a sense of loyalty to its console – we might have *Fable Legends* just around the corner, and no doubt we'll be seeing some more *Crackdown* at E3, but if Microsoft really wants to heat up our blood, we need to see some of the new *Gears Of War*. Black Tusk is a relatively unknown developer in the industry and if Sony continues to push Naughty Dog out in the open as its pride and joy, Microsoft really needs to start shouting about the companies it's got waiting out back.

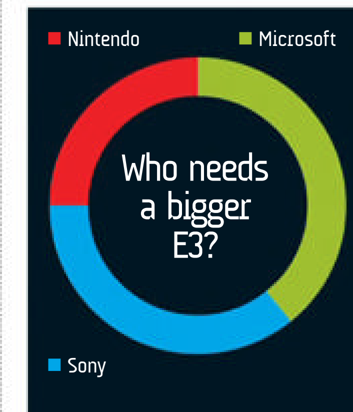
Speaking of Naughty Dog, the blockbuster studio has just pushed back *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* into 2016 – effectively decapitating



Above Microsoft will be looking to get over its tough start with a strong selection of exclusive titles in LA.

Reader Reaction

We asked you who you thought needed a better E3 showcase, and you responded in droves – interestingly, your loyalties lie between the Big Three; Nintendo came out lowest, but not by much. It seems each publisher needs to do well to win your favour



Nintendo has more to prove at E3 this year than Sony or Microsoft and with more *Zelda* footage it won't be hard for the Big N to steal the show.
Katy Ellis

Sony needs to show more of Project Morpheus to win. Microsoft has to do something big with *Minecraft*. And Nintendo will again announce and show great games – but the wider gaming media will still perceive it as disappointing by comparison.
Andrew Fisher

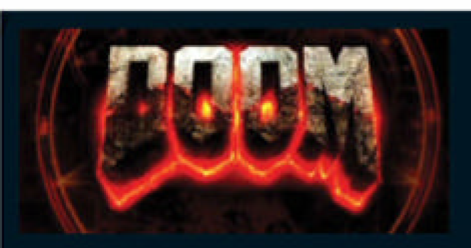
I'm gonna say Nintendo, I really think this is the year that media opinion on Nintendo will change. I've got no clue what it's got coming except for new *Zelda* trailers, but this is Nintendo, when has it ever not had something up their sleeves?
Alex Belcher

All of them.
Archangel

CD PROJEKT HAS REVEALED TWO DLC PACKS WILL ADD MORE THAN 30 HOURS OF GAMEPLAY

(SHOW)CASE STUDY

It's not just the hardware manufacturers that have big plans for E3 this year… Ubisoft, EA, Bethesda and Activision all have aces up their respective sleeves that we can expect to see unveiled

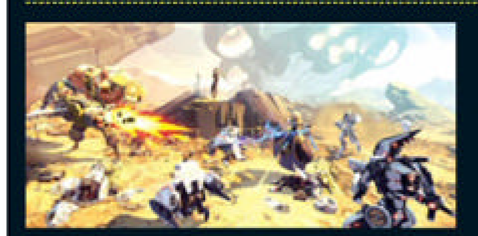


BETHESDA

■ BETHESDA WAS THE first company to announce it'll have its own presser, away from the showcases of the big console publishers. Rumour after rumour has suggested *Fallout 4* is in the works, and that's the most anticipated title to come from the publisher, but let's not forget about Bethesda's other big titles.

ACTIVISION

■ BY NOW, WE know that we're going to get another *Call Of Duty* game, but rumours abound that we can expect Treyarch's newest effort to be set after the events of *World At War*. Aside from that, Activision is tipped to bring back *Guitar Hero*, and we'll inevitably see the *Destiny* expansion, 'Comet'.



2K

■ ISN'T IT ABOUT time we saw a canon *Borderlands 3* on next-gen? We certainly hope so, and the best place we can expect to see it is at E3. We'll undoubtedly see more of *Battleborn*, too, and more than likely Ken Levine and the remaining Irrational team will take to the stage with something, too.

EA

■ EA WILL SURELY lead its E3 show with its *Star Wars* roster – Visceral has a game in the works, as does DICE. We're due another showing of the *Mirror's Edge* sequel – hopefully with a little bit more gameplay this time. It's been a year since we saw our last *Need For Speed* title, so you know that'll be there too.



UBISOFT

■ THANKS TO A leak just after the release of *Unity*, we know we can expect an *Assassin's Creed Victory* announcement. The *Tom Clancy* series also has a large amount of projects tied to it right now, and Ubisoft Montreal should put some more information about *Watch Dogs 2* out.

SQUARE ENIX

■ SQUARE ENIX HAS promised we'll see a new JRPG in production for home consoles, as well as a further look at *Final Fantasy XV*. On the Western side of development, we've been waiting for any movement on the multiplatform experience *Deus Ex Universe*, as well as further iteration on the *Thief* property.

Sony's exclusive holiday line-up. As we're seeing more and more gamers become dissatisfied with the now-annual end-of-year offerings (*Assassin's Creed, Call Of Duty, FIFA*, et al) it's becoming more important for the first parties to really push the boat and show off their hardware. *Bloodborne* might have gotten everyone's blood up when it released last month, but Sony can't ride that success for another eight months – we can hope for *Persona 5* in the West by the end of the year, but that's unlikely, and *Street Fighter V* has already been confirmed as a 2016 release. So aside from a few risky new IPs down the line (*SOMA*, *Daylight*, *Rime* and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*), Sony only really has *No Man's Sky* to lean on.

ENTER NINTENDO. LOOKING at the data concerning *Zelda* above, all Nintendo really needs to do to clean up this year would be to announce some legacy titles with 3D support for the ever-increasing 3DS install base, or simply remake some classics for Wii U.

The new, open-world *Legend of Zelda* is going to be massive – we're expecting to see a surge in Wii U sales in excess of 100% the month the game's released – and then there's the new *Star Fox* game to consider, as well as *Xenoblade Chronicles X* catering for the hardcore.

Nintendo is unlikely to come out with any real surprises at E3, though (unless Kojima jumped from Konami to work for the publishing giant… but those odds are so small they're almost insignificant). You know Nintendo will trot out the same IP you've been playing for decades, maybe with some new mechanics or in Claymation or something. It's got its mobile arm to consider now, granted, but we're willing to wager Nintendo will announce, promote and release those games on a 'when they're ready' basis. It's Microsoft and Sony we need to keep our eyes on this time around – especially with this huge VR push that's



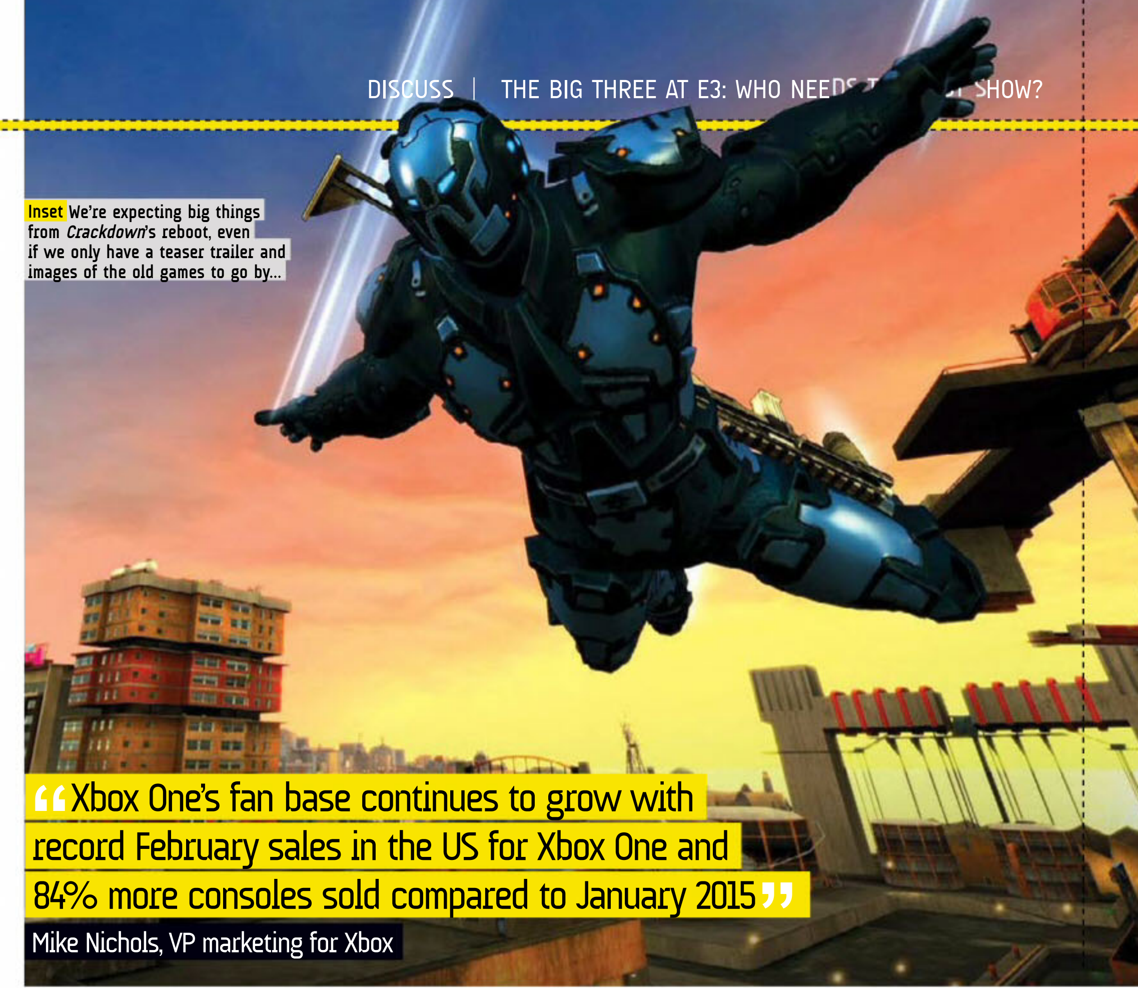


TOMB RAIDER HAS SOLD 8.5 MILLION COPIES ACCORDING TO SQUARE

taking the industry by storm right now. We think, really, the only thing that'll decide who wins this year's E3 is who manages to present their VR better – we already know quite a lot about Sony's Morpheus, but some more unique games added to its release list couldn't hurt. The Microsoft HoloLens, though… there could be some really interesting surprises there. Imagine if the AR headset allowed you to view a game's HUD over real life, stripping back the sometimes-cluttered screens of the likes of *Halo* or *Crackdown*. Imagine if it understood your local geography so much so that it let you scan in things in your house and make them in *Minecraft*.

E3 this year is going to be a battlefield, there's no doubt about that. The lack of confirmed exclusives for the PS4 could bite Sony's hind quarters hard if the publisher does little other than sit on its success, and Microsoft's array of upcoming titles could unexpectedly rout its rival console and maybe even retake the top spot in Europe (it's worth noting the sales race in the is a much closer story; Xbox sales occasionally overtake Sony's resting top spot there).

But then, wouldn't it be nice to see PC games make a surprise re-emergence up on stage over the three day showcase? You never know, with the Steam Machines launching later this year, it might just happen…



Inset We're expecting big things from *Crackdown*'s reboot, even if we only have a teaser trailer and images of the old games to go by…

> "Xbox One's fan base continues to grow with record February sales in the US for Xbox One and 84% more consoles sold compared to January 2015"
>
> Mike Nichols, VP marketing for Xbox

(25 MILLION PLAYERS & COUNTING)

How Hearthstone Took Over The World

As the second lot of downloadable content (dubbed *Blackrock Mountain*) gets ready to drop into *Hearthstone*, we sit down with the game's director Eric Dodds to talk about his original vision, keeping his huge player base happy and how he made card games cool again…

The virtual card game was never seen as particularly 'cool' before *Hearthstone* – how did you feel going on the journey to get this gaming niche into the minds of the masses?
That's an interesting question, because even within Blizzard there were certain people that thought we were crazy for making a collectible card game [laughs]. When we announced it at PAX East, there were definitely people in the audience who's faces you could see and they were *clearly* thinking 'Blizzard has gone mad! A collectible card game, who does that?'

Thing is, at Blizzard, we've been playing them for many, many, many years – it goes right back to the beginnings of Blizzard. We felt like, to us, it was crazy that there weren't more people enjoying collectible card games, so we just believed very strongly that if we made it in the right way, we could have tons and tons of people playing these games with us. We had this belief and we never knew if it was going to work out – but hey, it did, and it all worked out and there's this amazing and awesome feeling to it.

→ Not content with taking over the PC market with WOW, Activision Blizzard set its sights on mobile. 25 million players later, Hearthstone shows no signs of slowing down

The design philosophy at Blizzard has always been 'gameplay first'. What was the key thing you felt you needed to incorporate into a virtual card game?
I certainly love deck building – when you see a card and that light bulb goes off in your head and you go 'Oh my god, if I combine that and this it would be *amazing*'… that's certainly one thing I've always loved about deck building. And I think that creative spark happens in-game, you know – you're in a game, right, and you're *doomed*, you've been at one life for five turns but then… the light-bulb goes off and you say 'I can do it, I can do it, I can do it – this is going to be *awesome*.' [claps]



Above Expansions allow the developers to slowly alter the shape of the metagame by introducing new mechanics, bit by bit.

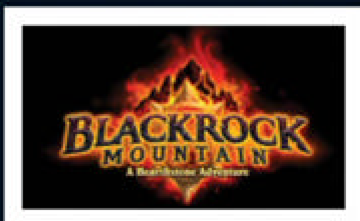
Another thing that's important – that I didn't actually start thinking about when we were first making the game, but has become more apparent to me over time – is storytelling through card games. So, someone at work is playing at their desk, and they tell me this story about a combination of things that happened… 'First I did this, then I drew this – then, oh my god, you won't believe what happened next!'

25 million players later, you're only getting more popular…
I know, right? It's exciting because we just love playing these types of games, and we're playing tons of the game still, internally.

With a free-to-play game like this, how do you decide how to structure the monetisation and payment aspects in the name of balance?
There's a whole lot of discussion at [Blizzard] about that, but it's absolutely fundamentally important that the whole game needs to feel like you don't have to pay if you don't want to. If you just use our

→ GHOST IN THE SHELL ONLINE, A FREE-TO-PLAY FPS, HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR WESTERN RELEASE IN 2015

EXPANSIONS & CONTRACTIONS



■ You don't have to buy the expansions to see the benefits of them in-game; the re-balancing that occurs from these drops affects everyone playing.

"So in our new expansion [Blackrock Mountain], we've got these dragon decks that are going to merge into the meta-game – playing a card affect by a dragon card shows the opponent what you've got in your hand," explains Dodds. It's a new mechanic that adds a whole new level of bluffing to a game that's already heavy on deception. "So we're introducing new [elements], we've got to make sure we're introducing new cards into the environment that allow players to take control of the field defensively.

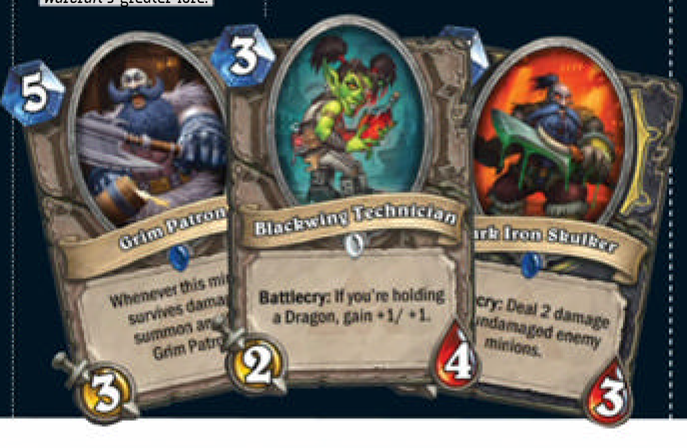
"We've had dragons in the game for a while, but it's always been a case of a player saying 'Cool, I'll build this deck and put *dragons* in it', they've never been able to make a specific dragon deck. So we listened to player feedback, [and constructed] this new expansion to mix these new cards with this whole new mechanic – letting your opponent guess what's in your hand adds a whole new level of depth to the game."

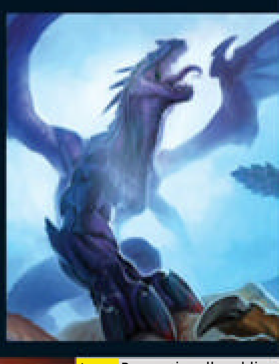
> "We had this belief and we never knew if it was going to work out – but hey, it did"
>
> Eric Dodds, game director, Blizzard

in-game currency you earn, Gold, that's still a very reasonable way to play. I currently use two accounts to play, and in both I haven't spent a penny. It's *critical* that you as a player don't encounter any barriers to your play, that you can enjoy the game without spending real money. Real money is just an accelerant to having a complete set of cards, but not a barrier to access the fun of the game.

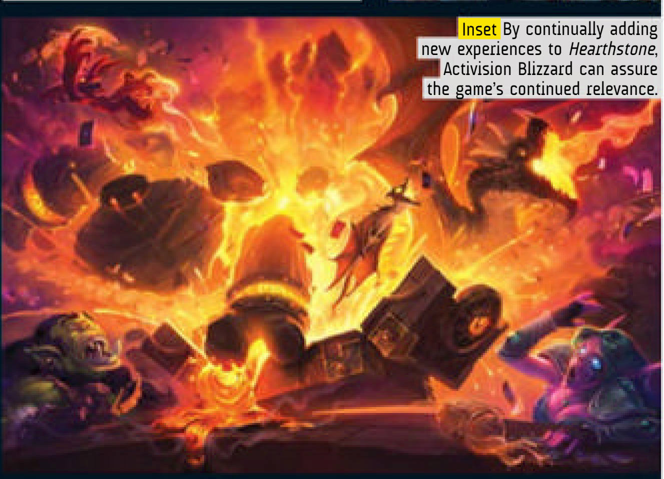
A lot of other mobile developers are calling your monetisation tactics 'the *Hearthstone* method'. It's become something of a popular plan in the industry. Was that intentional?
It's certainly exciting, but it's not something we intended. When we started out, our system for releasing content and allowing you to earn it mostly revolved around how you'd present a collectible card game virtually. One of our fundamental ideas is that this is a game for everyone, and you'll see that philosophy in our cards – the text on them is relatively simple, but the interactions between them are complex. You'll see that philosophy in our free-to-play model... I guess our [monetisation tactics] come down to that philosophy; the financial model just made sense when you think of that, right?

Below *Hearthstone* was always going to be popular on account of how it drew on *World Of Warcraft*'s greater lore.

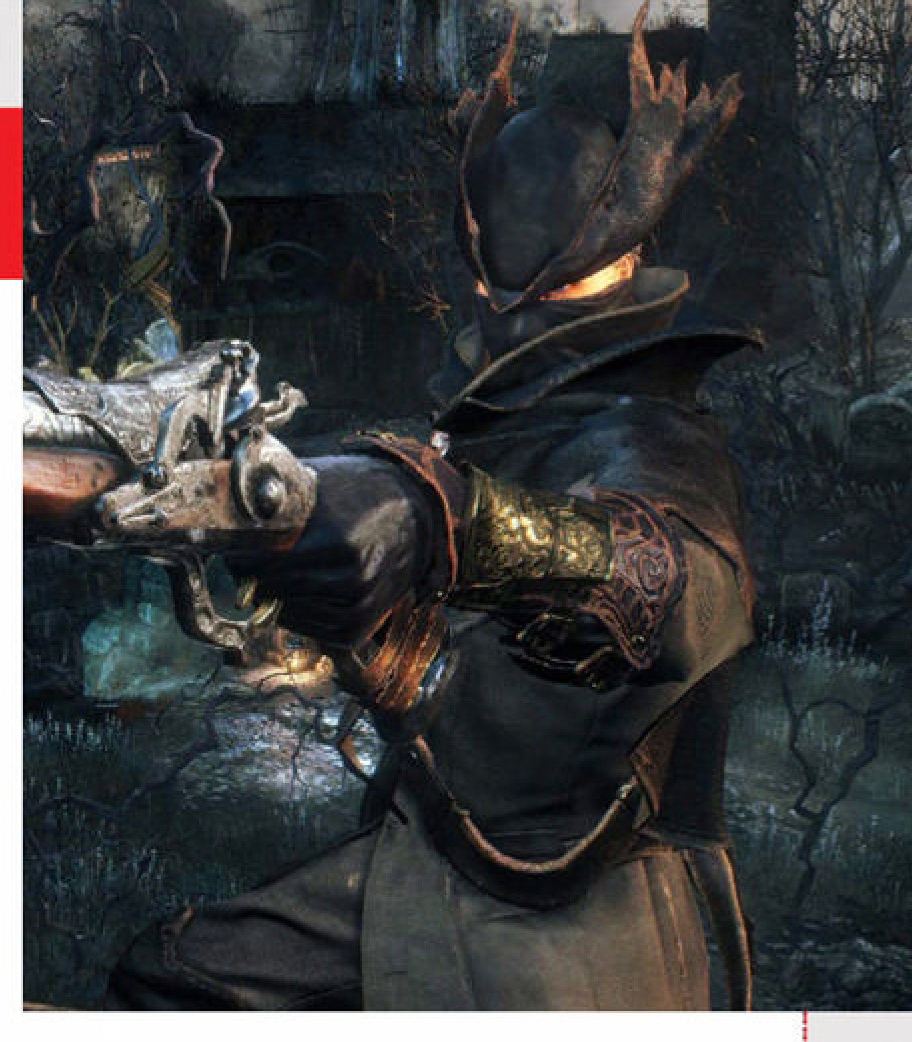




Inset By continually adding new experiences to *Hearthstone*, Activision Blizzard can assure the game's continued relevance.



KONGETSU
NEXT-GEN IS HERE AT LAST



How Japan learned to love PS4



It's been a slow start for Sony in its home territory. Worringly so, in fact, to the point where it looked as though interest in home consoles could actually have bottomed out entirely. Over the last month or so, though, a string of new releases launching on old and new formats at once really helped hammer home just what a difference the new hardware actually makes. *Yakuza 0*, *Dragon Quest Heroes*, *God Eater Burst*, even *Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round*… the new gen versions of each managed to debut in the top five and it seems that the need to play the best versions of these (mostly) great games is finally starting to kick in. Add to that the big exclusives like *Bloodborne* and *The Order: 1886* and it's not hard to see why, as of the time of writing, PS4 has been the best-selling console in Japan for a solid month.

While that's great news both for Sony and for Japanese players, it's important to consider what it means for the rest of the world. Slow uptake on the new hardware has seen a lot of developers sticking securely with older consoles up until now, with some of the obligatory PS4 ports that *have* come out feeling phoned in, like they've been given the same level of care and attention that EA would lavish on the Wii versions of *FIFA*. But with sales spiking, PS4 is now becoming a viable lead platform – how Japan will adapt to the new challenges and development times that come with this new hardware is another matter entirely, but it's clear to see that the trailblazers are already setting a pretty damn good example for the smaller studios to follow. While it'll take us a while to really see the effects of this change (just look how much longer than expected it is taking Western teams to get their PS4 games to market), players the world over can look forward to the same kind of Japan-developed curios that have made every other PlayStation platform worth owning.

The first of these is already here, of course, and I'm all over it. *Bloodborne* isn't the first PS4 game from a Japanese studio (*Knack* was there at launch, and Koei Tecmo has shown strong support) but it is the first real triple-A Japanese game to break the West and a savage reminder of the kind of games we'd be missing out on if Japan wasn't coming around to the idea of a new console generation. While Wii U holds relatively steady and Xbox One gets ignored just like its forerunners (Microsoft's new console is regularly outsold by VitaTV, to put its failure in perspective), Sony is riding a wave of successes that will help put it back on top on home soil. This is the tipping point. This is where it all kicks off. This is the actual start of a new generation. And what better game than *Bloodborne* to usher it in?

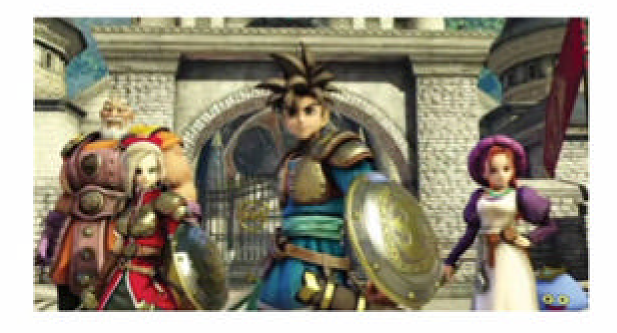
The real PlayStation 4 starts here…

This is the actual start of a new generation. And what better game than Bloodborne to usher it in?

Luke Albiges is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and is looking forward to seeing what Japan's best teams can do with the power of PS4…



One Piece, *Gundam* and even *Zelda* have all enjoyed great success with *Musou* spin-offs and unsurprisingly, *Dragon Quest*'s characters and monsters make it a great fit for the template. It's still flying high in the Japanese charts and is one of the best-selling PS4 games there so far – it's getting a localisation later this year but if you can't wait, gameplay is easy to understand and importing has never been easier.

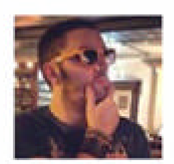


eSports 101

Your Guide to Pro Gaming



Elton John would appreciate the rise of eSports



As I stared at the trail of devastation left on my silver silk satin shirt, I tried to remain sanguine about the situation. I should have known better than to open a bottle of Cherry Perry Lambrini and watch the headline news on my favourite network channel E!. Only moments ago my taste buds were being teased with berry magic, but then the delightful Terrence Jenkins delivered the bombshell news that much to Sir Elton John's disgust, Dolce and Gabbana were against IVF. Needless to say, I spilled my drink.

Yes, this is relevant to eSports. Just bear with me. (And keep in mind over the next few sentences that I very much wasn't over my damaged shirt.) The thought popped into my mind that while Sir Elton is making the argument for life being beautiful however it's made, in the pro gaming world, we're currently arguing over the perceived 'organic' and 'synthetic' growth of eSports. Not exactly on the same level, I know. But we're talking about a *really* fancy shirt, here. My mind wasn't in the right place. Still, it got me thinking about this column.

It appears to be in vogue just now for every new game to have an eSports element to it.

> For every developer who has tried to cash in on eSports, we have seen a hundred who genuinely love eSports and want to see it grow

Talking heads attached to the project give in-depth interviews to blog sites espousing the wonders of the medium. Phoneys who don't even know it. Just more guys among the millions who walk in between greater and bigger people.

'eSports! We love to Play, Watch, Compete' they exclaim - or a hundred other words to that effect, backed by a legion of chumps and pompous little men waving the eSports banner with one hand, while slapping each other on the back with the other as if they've unlocked the code to greatness.

But wait a minute! Why should we be so cynical? For every developer who has tried to cash in on eSports, we have seen a hundred who genuinely love eSports and want to see it grow. Riot, Activision, Valve and Blizzard to name but a few. We should never forget that features such as Rocket Jumping and Bunny Hopping were actually due to players exploiting bugs in *Quakeworld*. Nor should we forget that *Counter-Strike* started life as mod by a bedroom developer. From small things like these, a massive movement can grow.

But equally we shouldn't forget all the additional applications that used to be required to enjoy eSports like Quakespy (later Gamespy), Mirc or even Voice communication programs. These are no longer required, as developers have integrated them straight into the game. Connectivity has been embraced by developers. And then there are the record viewing numbers we are now seeing due to direct support from videogame companies.

Just like most successful industries in the world, we have now entered a period of time where the small independent guy can come up with a great idea and the developers with the resources can make those ideas and dreams a reality. Whether that's something that happens organically or is pushed through by publishers looking to tap into a growing community doesn't really matter.

Now of course along the way we will see fly-by-night charlatans and we will see ideas and games that are way off target, but through it all we will undoubtedly see eSports benefit and grow because of this renewed collaboration between the makers of the games and the fans who love to play and watch them.

Elton was right, it really doesn't matter how you get there. In the end, eSports will only benefit from the journey.

Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity



Smite's move to consoles could see an eSports contender on Xbox One for the first time.



WHY I ❤...

Command & Conquer

ERIN ROBERTS, STUDIO HEAD, CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES

My favourite games are typically strategy games. Probably one of my favourite games on a strategy level was the original Command & Conquer, *just because it was balanced so well, it was one of those games where they did it so you didn't have to have huge units. Every unit had a purpose and it worked really well. You could have these engaging games where you could have fewer units, but if you managed them well you could turn the tide with someone else who had larger units than you.*

Later on the game turned into 'How many tanks can you build?' Then you do massive rushes and so forth. I had so many nights and weekends playing that with friends, it would definitely have to be one of my favourite strategy games.

"Because it was balanced so well, it was one of those games where they did it so you didn't have to have huge units"

ERIN ROBERTS, STUDIO HEAD, CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES


REPAIR
SELL
MAP



CONCEPT Rico Rodriguez is back, paragliding into the Mediterranean island of Medici to undermine another despotic rule and look utterly stylish whilst doing it

No man is an island



Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Avalanche Studios
Release: December 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2003 by brothers Linus and Viktor Blomberg alongside Christofer Sundberg, Avalanche is both a game developer and game engine creator that specialises in making new IP within its own engines. Based across Stockholm and New York, the studio has a unique trans-Atlantic flavour to its games.

Developer History

Just Cause
2006 [PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360]
The Hunter
2009 [PC]
Renegade Ops
2011 [PS3, PC, Xbox 360]
Mad Max
2015 [PS4, Xbox One, PC]

High Point

Just Cause 2 offered gamers a different kind of anarchy in the open world genre, swapping out the dull concrete of its peers for a lush tropical island.

Rico's coming home, and he's not happy. After toppling the fascist regime in the fictional Cuban analogue of Panau in *Just Cause 2* and liberating the Caribbean island of San Esperito in *Just Cause*, you'd have thought the Agency's top operative would deserve a bit of a rest (you know, aside from the five years his IP has been resting over at Square Enix).

There's no such luck for the half-American operative, though; while he's been gallivanting around the islands of the world, toppling the regimes of various dictators, General Di Ravello has established a brutal and oppressive reign of his own on Rico's home island of Medici. The Mediterranean archipelago is a lush haven, packed with natural resources; fertile farmlands, caverns packed with minerals, scenic spots of overwhelming natural beauty, a loyal local population. It's a veritable goldmine, and it's clear why Di Ravello wants to call it his own. There's a huge snowy mountain sticking up and out of the middle of Medici, too – something that seems a bit out of place in a Mediterranean archipelago – but we're willing to forgive the topological oversight if it means we've got a better place to base jump from.

In Rico's absence, the once peaceful island has been overrun with troops loyal to the dictator, and they're slapping up propaganda posters on any blank surface. Rico is *vexed.* This was (is) his home. How dare these loyalists stick their proverbial flag in the soil and declare it as their own? Details are fairly scarce about exactly how the plot is going to play out (we hope it's going to be deeper than the *Far Cry* model: wander in, execute some underlings, liberate country).

By giving Rico a personal hook in the story, we're hoping the over-arching objectives will be a little more compelling… *Just Cause* has always been fun, but's it's lacked in the narrative department. When you've got stablemates like *Far Cry*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, or even *Saints Row*, despite a lack of believability in their stories, they're all doing open-world experiences to a blockbuster level. It's no good just having a lush and detailed world.

/// That's where the staple *Just Cause* elements come in – the game has always prided itself on its absurd physics and the toolbox it gives you to experiment with. The *Just Cause* staples – the grappling hook and the parachute – make a welcome return, keeping the gameplay elements of their last iterations and scaling them up to even more ludicrous levels. Forget the days of being able to use only one boring grappling hook – now you can use up to three at once, and a simple press of your pad will tauten the tethers.

> "This is the culmination of a decade's worth of open-world evolution and innovation"
>
> CHRISTOFER SUNDBERG, FOUNDER/CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER AVALANCHE STUDIOS

This opens up a whole ton of options for dealing with pesky military pursuers – you'll be able to take out choppers like AT-ATs in *Star Wars*, you'll be able to tie soldiers to the back of your convertible and take them for a ride on the heat-cracked asphalt of Medici's roads. You'll be able to rig an enemy chopper with explosives – it flies up, takes three barrels with it and becomes a hyper-mobile bomb, unbeknownst to the pilots. The new grappling hooks alone multiply the potential for mischief tenfold.

Then there's Rico's newest toy – the wingsuit. This is by far one of the most exciting additions. *Far Cry 4* and *Grand Theft Auto V* have individually proved that open-world games released now must have a fun





Below: Of course, once you don't *have* to hijack the vehicles – you might prefer to just pack them with C4 and be done with it.



VIEW TO A KILL

ONE THING THAT'S struck us more than anything so far is how pretty *Just Cause 3* is. While we're sure the game is going to look pretty on console, we were pleased to hear that Avalanche is working with Nvidia directly on the PC version – which means we can expect some of the most impressive graphics and textures in the sandbox genre from Avalanche

Inset: Using the wingsuit and your parachute, you can intercept and hijack enemy vehicles… including fighter jets. That's handy – if you draw a little too much attention to yourself, you can basically arm yourself with your enemies' wares.

way of navigating the air above the open world below. Open world games can't risk expanding horizontally any more – what would they add, really? More towns, more fields, more oceans? No, developers are looking to the verticality of their open worlds to show us what else can be done when the player is given full autonomy and a toolbox to go out and play with.

Enter the wingsuit. Combined with the grappling hook, you've got the means to launch yourself into the air off just about *anything*. You can do it from ground level, you can do it from height, you can even grapple up and launch yourself into a momentum-based rise. When you deploy the suit, the controls are light and airy, difficult to gauge at first, but eventually you get the hang of it and experience the best mechanic *Just Cause 3* has to offer: floating.

You can just float around, like a paper bag caught in an updraft. Where *Far Cry 4*'s wingsuit was rigid and punishing (dip too quickly and you *will* die), *Just Cause 3* is more forgiving; the wingsuit is designed as a means of traversal from any one place to another, not like the obstacle course mentality of *Far Cry*'s. The isle of Medici has cavernous hollows you can explore from the air, mountainous regions for you to fling yourself off, and (inevitably) high-rise buildings that'll satiate all your base-jumping desires. In the age of commentary culture, the memeification of the Internet and with the rampant popularity of gaming gifs, there's a lot to be said for a feature like this.

/// But navigation and exploration is only one facet of the *Just Cause* experience – there's also the combat. Just because the narrative is hitting a little closer to home (literally), it doesn't mean Avalanche is going to tone down the chaos. Case in point: the 'Fire Leech' – a missile launcher that can churn out up to eight incendiary rockets at a time. It's insanely overpowered, and ridiculously fun to use. It's got an auto lock-on feature that'll target any enemy soldiers or destructible environmental elements, which suggests to us that Avalanche is going to have us taking on some pretty vast hoards of enemies.

It's worth noting that the 'Fire Leech' targets destructible scenery, since the developers are keen to point out that *Just Cause 3* will feature 'cascading destruction'. You know how *Battlefield* and DICE love to throw that awful 'levolution' portmanteau out there? Well, 'cascading destruction'

A BUYER'S (BLACK) MARKET

RUMOURS ABOUND THAT *Just Cause 3* began as a free-to-play game on PC, while the console ports would be paid for, but full of microtransactions. While we now know the game will see a regular retail release, some of the game's original elements are creeping into the systems.

There have been reports that Supply Drops can be paid for through a Black Market menu, and the recharge times can be reduced by using real-world money. These claims are totally unsubstantiated, but how acceptable is it to include paid shortcuts in a triple-A release?

We don't mind, so long as transactions don't infringe on the resting economy. It would be easy for Square Enix to fall into the same trap it did with *Final Fantasy: All The Bravest*, which had the most cynical take on the F2P model we've seen on mobile.

> "With over 400 square miles of complete freedom from sky to seabed… prepare to unleash chaos in the most creative ways you can imagine"
>
> PRESS RELEASE AVALANCHE STUDIOS

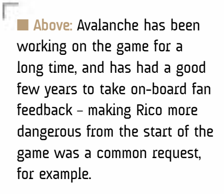


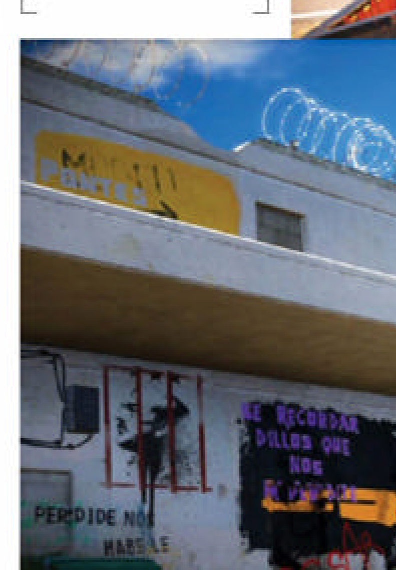
Above The Fire Leech is our new favourite sandbox toy. It even beats the Dubstep Gun from *Saints Row IV*. That's saying something.

Above: Avalanche has been working on the game for a long time, and has had a good few years to take on-board fan feedback – making Rico more dangerous from the start of the game was a common request, for example.

Right: The standout strength of *Just Cause* has always been its art direction, and the third instalment looks no different in terms of quality.

Below: Rico wouldn't be Rico unless he was armed to the teeth, now, would he?









is basically that, but more humble (and accurate). If you decide to, say, lace an entire warehouse with C4 because you want to disrupt a cocaine cartel's output, then your detonation won't just blow up the warehouse… a piece of corrugated roof or a burning chunk of timber might knock a wall down, toppling a lamppost, smashing another building. There are a lot of in-game assets that can be affected by the destruction physics (thanks to the new and improved, and aptly named, Avalanche Engine) – the whole setup might not be as item-heavy as the Red Faction games, but it works within the context of *Just Cause*, for sure.

/// With this increased destructibility comes increased responsibility though; perhaps because Rico has such a violent effect on the island's economy, or perhaps because he's so ingrained in the Agency now he can request whatever he wants, all currency has been removed from the game's system. Instead of earning and saving up for new guns, vehicles, explosives or upgrades, you're going to have to rely on supply drops – custom packages you can set up from predetermined locations and get sent (almost) at will.

This comes with an advantage and a disadvantage – want to take down that small outpost that's stopping the villagers getting their imports? Request a tank! 'Why not?' you think, 'I have access to it, after all!' Thing is, Rico is facing the terror of the dictator's army, and anything he does *will* get matched by the opposing forces – one tank for Rico might mean three tanks for the loyalists. You've got to pick your fights well, and choose to scale them responsibly.

To offset what could become a fairly unbalanced supply system, you're given infinite C4. Considering we spent the majority of *Just Cause 3* running around blowing stuff up and guffawing like idiots, this is big news. The C4 packs a punch, too; it's not just some arbitrary infinite and weak attack you can use. It comes back down to the core tenet of design Avalanche seems to be adopting with this game; that it needs to be *fun*.

One of the first enemy encampments you'll be tasked with 'liberating' is a multi-story oil rig that's been drilled into the side of a cliff, for example. Sneaking in underneath the whole thing, planting C4 on each of the rig's legs, retreating to a safe distance and blowing the whole thing sky high… That sounds amazing, right? Well, that's only one route you could take. You could go in from the air, rain death with the 'Fire Leech' and scarper. You could lace a tanker with explosives, ram it straight in through the front gates and bail at the last minute… Creating your own narratives in a world that only really puts physics against you is what *Just Cause* is about, and it's nice to see that Avalanche hasn't forgotten that over these past five years.



HOPE ON A ROPE

RAPPELLING WAS one of the best bits in the old *Rainbow Six: Vegas* games, and gave the levels a dynamic and vertical property that you find lacking in a lot of the more 'serious' shooters. Inching down a window frame until you can peer into a room and pop a few headshots remains as satisfying as ever, and luckily all the houses in *Rainbow Six: Siege* appear to have purpose-built railings installed, so you can hoist yourself down to any opening on any level. Handy, that.

SMOOTH OPERATORS

EACH PLAYABLE character in *Siege* is called an 'Operator' and will have a unique set of abilities and skills that will support your allies. The way the game is balanced with each operator's skillset *forces* you to work as a team. *Siege* is apparently based more closely on the original Tom Clancy books, hence why each Operator has its own personality, rather than being designated a 'Class'.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Genre: Online tactical FPS
Release: 2015
Players: 10+

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal is responsible for the *Far Cry*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Splinter Cell* series, among many more. Practising since 1999, the studio is one of the biggest contributors to the gaming industry. It's very much the lynchpin that holds the bigger Ubisoft empire together.

High Point

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon was a totally left-field game that was announced on April Fool's Day and yet, somehow, wasn't a joke. It showed willingness to poke fun at itself that we never thought Ubisoft would support…



THINK BEFORE DOING

THE OVERHEAD tactical maps make a return to the series during the 'briefing' section of each match. This means that, as you're selecting your loadout, you can discuss your plan of action. For us, it goes like this: 'We'll smash the door in, you grenade the window, and you – with the mask – you send your drone in to scout'. We just like smashing doors in with a sledgehammer. Satisfying. Credit to the sound design team for that one.

Rainbow Six: Siege

CONCEPT Ubisoft's own take on *Counter-Strike* brings the terrorists-versus-police battle to consoles, and focuses on tactics, teamwork and takedowns...

Once more unto the breach, dear friends

If a terrorist has taken someone hostage inside a white picket fence, suburban house in North America, it turns out your best option *isn't* to blow down the walls, doors and ceiling and go in all guns blazing. Because then everyone – including the poor civilian hostage – dies. *Rainbow Six: Siege* is all about planning ahead and working with your team to fulfil your objectives. The reason we're so fixated on the walls is because Ubisoft's Anvil-Next engine makes destructible environments even more key to the *Rainbow Six* experience than anything we saw in *Vegas* or (the now cancelled) *Patriots*.

To defend your quarry, or reinforce your advancing entrenchments, you'll have to build on top of weak spots in your structures. Don't think just because you're in a bedroom, aimed at the door, you're safe... anyone could bust in through the drywall behind you. But it's not just architectural redesigning you'll have to do to stay alive, oh no... we looked at some other important lessons to be learned during Siege's current alpha...



Crowfall

CONCEPT ■ Merging the fantasy setting of classic MMOs like *WOW* with the politics of *Eve Online*, *Crowfall* has set its sights on engaging more cerebral players

The politics of massively multiplayer power

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: ArtCraft Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2015
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Crowfall is the first title from ArtCraft Entertainment, but thanks to its founders, J Todd Coleman and Gordon Walton, there's plenty of MMO pedigree at the studio. Between them they've worked on *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, *Shadowbane*, *Ultima Online* and many more. It's a solid history that bodes well for the future.

Developer History

Ultima Online
1997 [PC, Linux]

Shadowbane
2003 [PC, Mac]

Wizard 101
2008 [PC, Mac]

Star Wars: The Old Republic
2011 [PC]

High Point

The Old Republic remains a vital and successful MMO in a difficult market so Gordon Walton's experience as executive producer on the project should stand ArtCraft in good stead.

There's plenty of backstabbing going on in the MMO world, but it's usually rogues doing it and it doesn't involve the toppling of empires. *Crowfall* is looking to change that. Drawing influences from games like *Eve Online* and great fantasy worlds like those of the *Game Of Thrones* stories, *Crowfall* wants to bring something darker and more player-driven to the fantasy MMO world. As you go out and battle for your faction, guild or just for yourself you could help build a power base within *Crowfall* that will last for an age as a new empire.

That's the hope anyway as this MMO busted through its KickStarter funding goal in just a few days and is drawing a lot of loving glances from the massively multiplayer fanbase. With some interesting approaches to campaign structure, persistence, resource gathering and faction building, *Crowfall* looks like a very different kind of role-playing experience than we've seen in some time and could be a welcome new take to freshen up the genre.

1 LIMITED PERSISTENCE

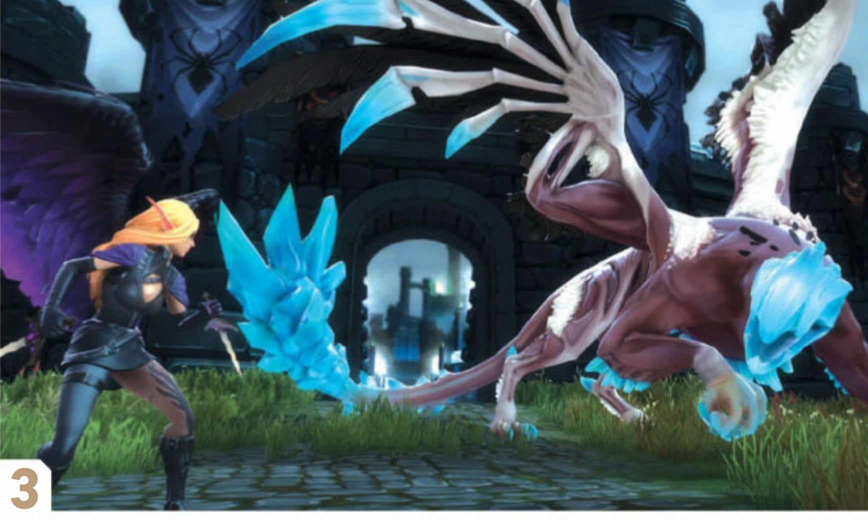
While *Crowfall*'s champions are persistent and you'll be able to keep your character (or multiple characters) moving between campaigns, the worlds on which campaigns take place are not permanent. Campaign worlds will last between one to three months (possibly six, but it can vary) as they are consumed by something called the Hunger, essentially an undead army a bit like *Halo*'s Flood. Your job is to gather resources for your homeworld, which is persistent, but barren. You need to set up base, build up armaments, scavenge for weapons and resources and generally pick the bones of the world before launching an offensive against your enemies.



"Instead of creating thousands of hours of content, we give the players the tools they need to create their own experiences. Crowfall is an economic, political and military simulator"
TODD COLEMAN ARTCRAFT ENTERTAINMENT











2 DESTRUCTION RULES

Since these campaign worlds won't be sticking around, there's nothing to stop you from razing them to the ground. Using a voxel system similar to *Minecraft*, *Crowfall* will allow you to build and destroy fortresses, mine the world and mess everything up during the campaign. You can build siege weapons and attack other bases too or just level villages. It's a smart move since these worlds won't last to let players really leave their mark on them while they can. Ultimately either the world will end or a victor will emerge.

3 ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

As a champion of the gods you have several alliances you can make. The first is to your god of choice, of which there are 12. Then there's the faction to which your god may belong, representing Order (saving the worlds), Chaos (appease the Hunger) and Balance (don't let either side become too powerful). Faction battles take place in the God's Reach worlds, inter-god battles happen in The Infected zone, you fight Guild on Guild regardless of the gods in The Shadow and it's every champion for themselves in The Dregs.

4 THE POLITICS OF POWER

Since the game worlds are empty when you arrive, grabbing and securing territory becomes all important. That means teaming up, working together and it ultimately means lots of politics and potential for betrayal. What's being set up here is the setting for some *Eve Online*-style political systems to emerge as the monarchs of each faction bestow power to their underlings and each campaign world offers opportunities for new power bases to emerge. How the powerful will rise though is something that has yet to be revealed.

5 KEEPING THINGS INTERESTING

Every campaign world will be procedurally generated so they should be pretty random from the off, but what ArtCraft can also do is change some of the parameters of the worlds in their creation. For instance perhaps magic isn't so strong in one world, or resources are less plentiful. Perhaps this campaign will last six months before a winner emerges or the end goal could be easy to find. There are all sorts of tweaks that can be applied and adjusted not only to freshen things up but also reacting to feedback as *Crowfall* grows with time.



Below: The level design doesn't seem to have pacing in mind, so much as messing with the player. Every screen will feature some fiendish and ridiculous puzzle that'll fry your brain if you let it...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, PS4, Wii U
Origin: USA
Publisher: Pencil Test Studios
Developer: In-house
Release: 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Pencil Test Studios was established by Mike Dietz and Ed Schofield – videogames veterans that have served various media companies for over 20 years. Their main strengths lie in cinematic animation (the duo has worked on *Kinectimals*, *God Of War III* and various *Star Wars* games), but teamed up with *Earthworm Jim* creator Doug TenNapel, Pencil Test has the combined artistic talent to create a game that'll live up to the team's past projects (*The Neverhood*, *Earthworm Jim*).

Armikrog

CONCEPT ■ Space explorer Tommynaut crash lands on an alien planet full of vicious flora and fauna. He's found by the locals and imprisoned in a strange prison called Armikrog… it's your job to get him out

Breaking the mould

When you're creating a game using stop-motion animation, you can't afford to run at 60 frames per second. The standard rate for point-and-click games is a steady 30 frames; adhering to the new industry standard of 60 frames per second *literally* doubles the workload. But *Armikrog* actually looks better for running in 30 frames, because of the way it's presented. Character animations seem stronger and more solid, and the hyper-realism of the tracking takes away from the more detached impressions videogames like *Armikrog* try to achieve.

Anyone who played *The Neverhood* could appreciate how unique the game looked: the mixed media canvases played host to some surreal and bizarre creations, all supported by one of the most left-field soundtracks we've heard in gaming. *Armikrog* is a spiritual successor to *The Neverhood* (a cursory glance at its main character will tell you that), and as such, the entire creative team has been re-hired for this new project.

It'd be easy to simply call the game claymation, but *Armikrog* is a lot more than that. While the main body of the game is built and animated with clay and stop frames, the developers are keen to also include puppet fabrication methods and other media to achieve their specific look and feel.

Below: Mixing the clay style with other textures (like this fuzzy… thing) gives *Armikrog* a unique and interesting flavour, unlike anything else on the market.



"How is that clay moving? Is it witchcraft? Are there bugs inside? I'm frightened! But I have to admit, it looks pretty cool"
TIM SCHAFER, DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS

In *Armikrog*, you'll follow intrepid space explorer Tommynaut through a nonsense land of madness and intrigue, followed by a blind (and incredibly verbal) dog-thing named Beak-Beak. There'll be plenty of colourful characters to meet, and players will face a series of fiendish puzzles that'll tease the left-hand side of your brain.

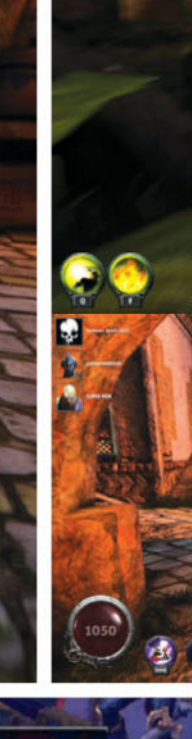
Interestingly, the game is made 'straight through', which means all the animation and design work is done chronologically, so the developers can't go back and alter any elements after they've committed. It's a difficult challenge – and one that means the team *absolutely* has to know what it's doing at every stage – but one that should ultimately pay off: the stop-motion style really adds something special and peculiar.

We got a little hands-on with the game during the introduction section, where you're tasked with breaking out of the eponymous Armikrog, and it is simply a matter of clicking on *everything*. Tommynaut will interact with objects (more often than not, they're the ones you least expect) and then you must mix those items with other interactive elements to see what happens.

It seems like standard point-and-click fare at first, but it quickly begins to get obscure. This is a game for people that love pulling on *every* thread they can find, in the hope of finding a solution to a problem that's been bugging them for days.

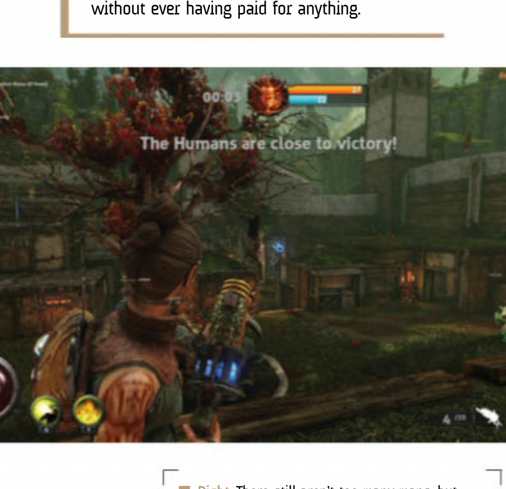
■ Below: The new Defiler class on the vampire side is reminiscent of *Killzone 2*'s excellent Saboteur class or the Spy class in *Team Fortress 2*. It's best to pick this one when the human team are a little too good at defending, to throw a little chaos into their midst.





PAY-TO-WIN?

THERE IS A worry that, by hiding abilities and extra classes behind pay walls, *Nosgoth* is empowering those that are willing to pay. In truth it's actually a fine example of how free-to-play should be done: these same extras can be unlocked as you play by earning in-game currency, and really that's no different than the way *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* dole out new weapons and attachments these days. Cosmetic items, such as skins are purchasable, but anything that has a gameplay element can still be earned with in-game gold or tokens. More than anything, the core set of tools available to a new account is just as viable as any of the unlockables – you could easily play *Nosgoth* without ever having paid for anything.



■ Right: There still aren't too many maps, but more are being added all the time. Each offer a distinct visual design, too.







Nosgoth

CONCEPT ■ A free-to-play, third-person multiplayer shooter with asymmetrical design set in the *Legacy Of Kain* series; basically everything you'd hope a *Soul Reaver* sequel wouldn't be

Not quite so lifeless

You've got unprecedented access to game development, these days. Closed alphas are often seen more as demos, Kickstarter has burdened backers with playtesting and the rise of Steam Early Access means that more than ever before you'll be able to follow the development process as it happens. Where the Early Access is honest – such as in the case of *Nosgoth* – you'll often be able to follow the game from its rougher mechanical alpha through to its more playable open beta phase. In truth, with *Nosgoth*, it's something more of a soft launch, and since it's free-to-play in essence, there's no real concern hopping in for a round or two. The months of polish have done *Nosgoth* a great deal of good, too, rounding out each match to something more unique. Where it once combined the asymmetrical vampires versus humans combat well, there's a greater sense of identity about it now; it's been honed to allow both sides a particular style – and even *feeling*. The humans – with their ranged weapons – will need to huddle together, find a secure area and wait for the assault, replete with fearful and frantic spot-checking – a calm-before-the-storm sort of panic. The vampires, alternatively, are more fragile now, rewarding well-executed hit-and-run strategies rather than the blitzkrieg rampages required only a few months back. Not only does it give *Nosgoth* its own playstyle, but it means it's proof that games in early access can flourish, as much thanks to their gradual, mechanical balancing as anything else.

Improvements have been heaped onto the game elsewhere, too. Updated and tweaked graphics, more maps and even a new mode – which, itself, is still in beta. There's a training mode, too, which isn't perhaps necessary for a game where all you're essentially doing is pointing at an enemy and clicking, but it does help to introduce the technical differences between humans and vampires – and the various abilities of each class. In fact there are actually four new classes now added into *Nosgoth*: Prophet and Vanguard on the human side, Defiler and Summoner on the vampire faction. They're each hidden behind unlock systems so you'll need to earn the right to play them, but they still offer something new to each faction. Prophets are more support roles, debuffing enemies and healing allies, while Vanguards are a solely tanky, melee class – helpful, perhaps, but a disadvantage for the typically ranged humans. Defilers are more of a stealth class, intending to sneak on the opposition with disguises or camouflage while summoners – as you might expect – can draw demons into the world to help attack. Each class does offer something new and are unique enough to act as a reward for those putting in the time to rank up.

/// It's at this point that it's worth mentioning how robust *Nosgoth* now is; if you're interested, there wouldn't be much sense holding out for its true 'release' – all the requisite parts are already here. The underlying system of menus, stores and options are seemingly as complete as they ever will be – including an incrementally better daily bonus for logging in each day. It's progressed very nicely indeed, and a fine example of how Early Access can result in a better game for everyone. There are still questions around the options to purchase different abilities, but it's testament to the evolved balancing of the game that no faction, class or ability is afforded preference. You'll no doubt find a personal taste in the particulars, but you won't have any greater advantage as a result. At this moment *Nosgoth* is about as complete as it can be – from mechanical, technical and feature-ready standpoints – yet with the steady slew of announced and unannounced additions to the game it's clear there's going to be a reason to return to this one for months to come. When it'll be officially deemed 'ready for release' we don't yet know, but at this point such an arbitrary definition is becoming increasingly futile.

> "There is no real end to what you can learn in a beta program, whether from a technical point of view or even anecdotal reactions"
> COREY DAVIS PSYONIX

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Psyonix
Release: TBA
Players: 6

Developer Profile

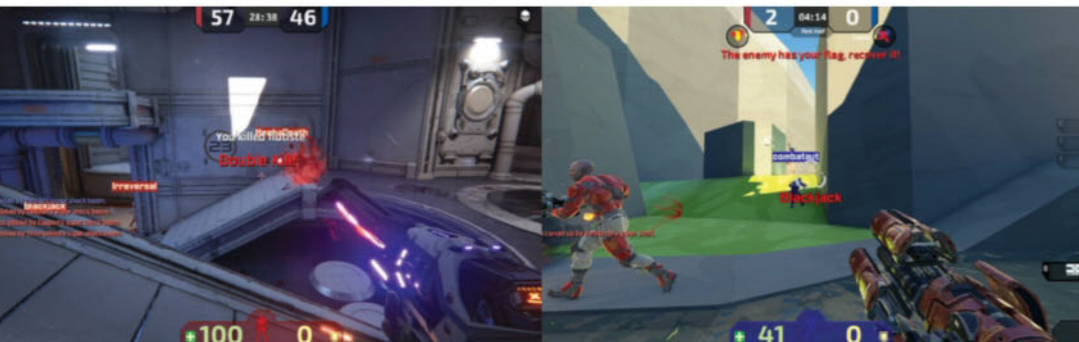
Psyonix's history is a short one, with *Nosgoth* standing out as its perhaps only notable release since it was founded in 2000. Multiplayer is its keystone, however, initially cutting its teeth in co-developing *Unreal Tournament 2004* before moving onto its sadly overlooked, yet ridiculously named digital PS3 vehicular football game, *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle Cars*.

Developer History

Unreal Tournament 2004
2004 [PC]
Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle Cars
2008 [PS3]
Whizzle
2009 [PC]
ARC Squadron
2012 [iOS]
Nosgoth
2015 [PC]

High Point

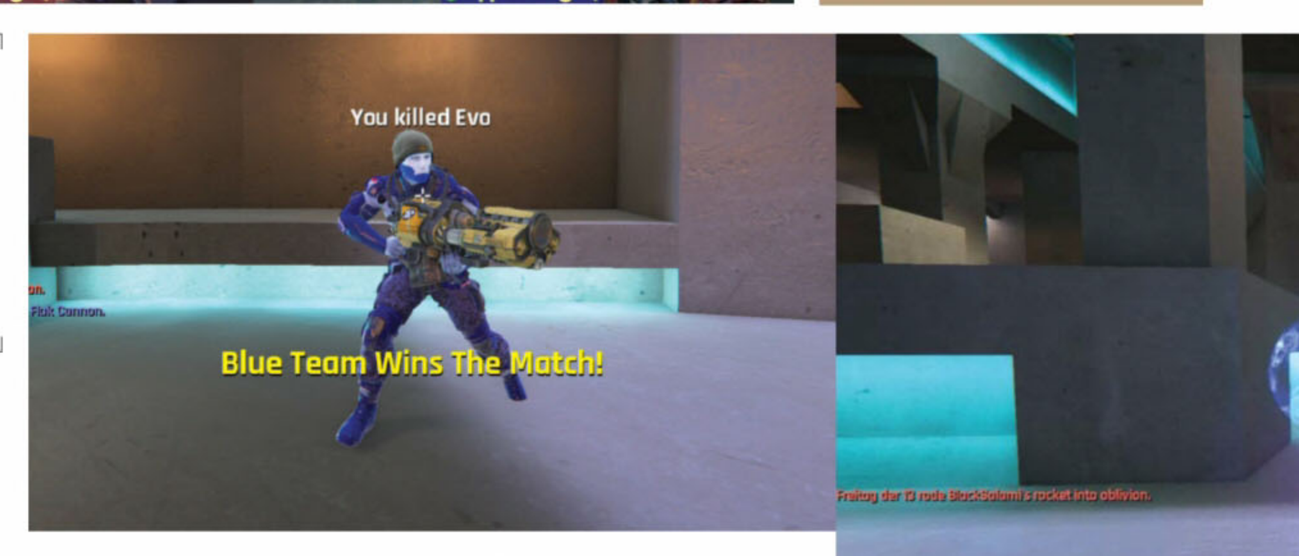
While *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle Cars* did maintain a cult following it was far too early in the PS3's digital life to garner much success, meaning the early access *Nosgoth* is the dev's only real tangible high point.



KEEP A LOOKOUT

OUTPOST23 IS the name of the only map to have been completed to a standard Epic is calling finished – though it could be altered over time. Visually it's a treat, with dynamic light reflecting in almost every floor, scratches and marks diffusing the effect dependant on the surface. It's gorgeous, but it's also a great example of level design. Ledges that appear inaccessible become shortcuts as you wall jump from a nearby panel. Small gaps from platforms become lifesavers as you're unexpectedly assaulted by an enemy. Already it's clear there are several, smart ways of traversing this map.

Above: Insta-gib mode has already been included in the game, for those that prefer their arena shooters as high octane as they can get it.
Right: Currently most levels resemble concrete bunkers and so don't look like much fun. Their design comes first, however, and there are already a number of standout maps.



Unreal Tournament

CONCEPT ■ Epic returns to its classic competitive shooter franchise with the added power of Unreal Engine 4 behind it and a bold new free-to-play release planned

Believe it or not

Unreal Tournament has always been something of a tech demo for Epic. Though it might not approach the series' development in that way, it's always been the one to prove the worth of Unreal Engine, bundling its levels and character models with a checklist of new features. Which is what makes this brand new *Unreal Tournament* all the more significant; just like its engine, the game is completely free. Just like its engine the game is developed alongside the needs and desires of its community. And – just like its engine – a marketplace bolted onto the game will fund much of its development.

But that's all business, and while *Unreal Tournament* has always been a showcase of sorts it's also always been an exceptional example of arena-focused multiplayer combat – with varying degrees of success, admittedly. Though it's currently in alpha, it is downloadable and playable by anyone who wants to give it a go – so there's already a decent player base available. Currently there's only one level that's properly built, the rest resembling blocky, barely-textured husks of maps – and in this age of Early Access, it's easy to forget that's actually what an alpha *should* look like. It's especially important here because in arena multiplayer level design is one of the most important aspects; such a game lives or dies on a player's ability to navigate smartly and skilfully. In that sense many of the levels here are already offering the familiar mental acuity that comes with a good match of *UT*, thanks largely to the persistent player testing the game has had since it was first playable late last year. It's a constant, rigorous sort of development that has led to some finely-honed levels so fluid and compelling that you likely won't even notice their unfinished visuals.

/// Of course the level design is only an enabler in games of this ilk; the difference between a great arena shooter and an exceptional one. This new *Unreal Tournament*'s 'feel' of combat is already incredible, a mechanical combination of speed and movement that reminds you why this type of multiplayer used to be so popular. There have been changes, primary among them being the removal of the double-jump, with a heavier emphasis on acrobatics. It's a contentious point for fans; the jump itself is much lower and heavier, but this is preferable when matched with the acrobatics. Side-hops remain – imperative for evading split-second Shock Rifle blasts – and have been paired with wall jumps, and it's here that the new mechanics become wholly enthralling. Some spots in maps are only accessible through wall jumps, but more important is the way they can open up shortcuts. Clutch manoeuvres to outplay your opponents are the key reason that better players will rise to the top of the leaderboards. In fact, it's this element that could make this new *Unreal Tournament* the best one yet.

> "Players will be able to make their voice heard, and participate meaningfully in setting the direction of development"
>
> STEVE POLGE, EPIC GAMES

The core arsenal of weapons returns, and as with everything else they're still open to customisation and tweaks. Believe it or not, the Bio Rifle has become useful, now altered to allow smaller globules of gel to collate and, eventually, hone in on targets. By and large the tools of destruction do remain unchanged, and there's even an Insta-gib mutator all ready to go. In many ways it feels much like any other *Unreal Tournament* before it, but that would be underselling those important changes to movement. It's been a while since an arena multiplayer game has elicited such excitement, and not thanks to those rare keen-eyed-yet-unlikely reactionary shots either. More than anything else, this new *Unreal Tournament* is about movement, about understanding navigational opportunities and exacting them as much by intuition as anything else; and if it can maintain that thrill as its levels grow into something other than unflattering boxes then this shooter is already a success and just needs to be given to the public at large.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: US
Publisher: Epic Games
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC
Players: 1-32

Developer Profile

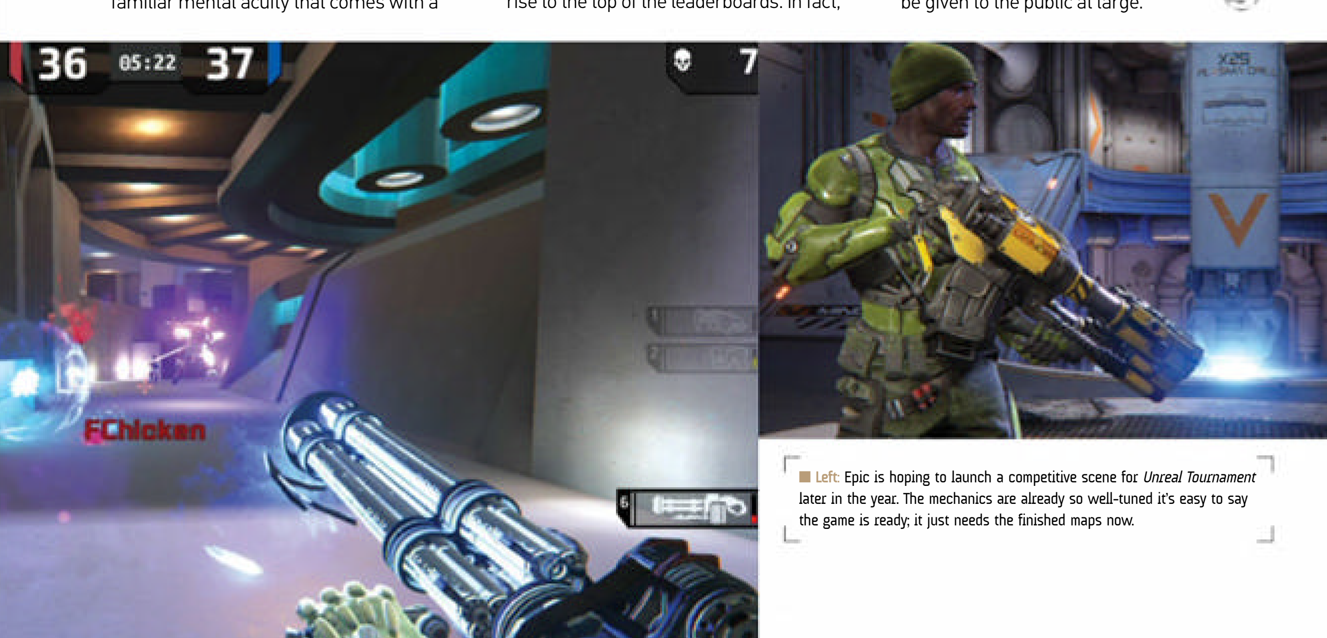
Epic's brash, meat-headed shooters form its core identity – and rightly so, since *Unreal Tournament* and *Gears Of War* helped form the state of shooters in their respective eras. These days, however it's just as notable for its powerful Unreal Engine.

Developer History

Jazz Jackrabbit **1994 [PC]**
Unreal Tournament **1999 [PC]**
Gears Of War **2006 [Xbox 360]**
Gears Of War 3 **2011 [Xbox 360]**

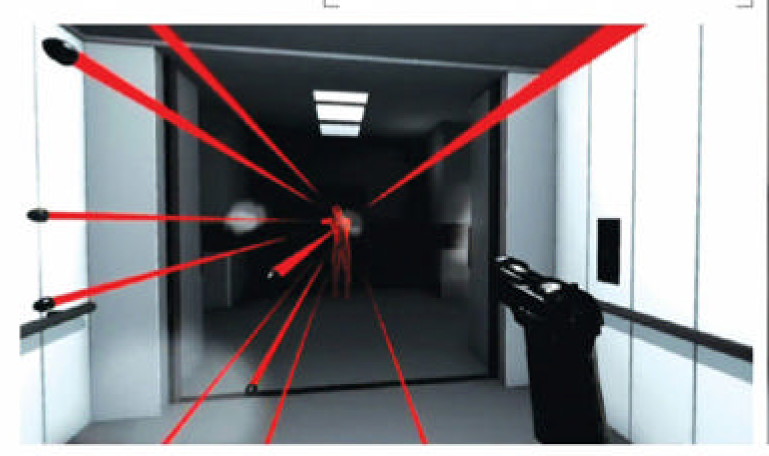
High Point

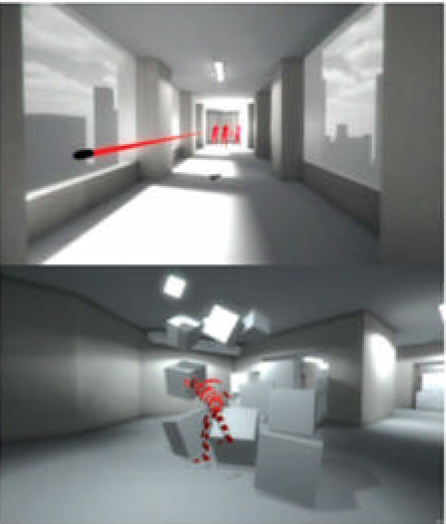
There have been a number of milestones in Epic's history, but the release of *Gears Of War* was its most significant, heralding a new generation and deciding the route the Xbox 360 would take in many ways.



■ Left: Epic is hoping to launch a competitive scene for *Unreal Tournament* later in the year. The mechanics are already so well-tuned it's easy to say the game is ready; it just needs the finished maps now.

■ Below: The game has been trialed on the Oculus Rift, too, which is pretty intense – we tried it out a while ago, and it really does make you feel like Neo in *The Matrix*.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Xbox One, PC, Mac
Origin:
Poland
Publisher:
Superhot
Developer:
In-house
Release:
June 2015
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Piotr Iwanicki and the inventively titled Superhot team developed *Superhot* as part of a 7-day FPS game jam back in 2013, releasing it as a browser game the month after. The team later decided to put the game on Kickstarter to fund a full release, and met its initial goal within 24 hours, achieving $230,000 by the time the funding window ended.

Superhot

CONCEPT ■ In a world where you can slow down time to your advantage, there are going to be people after you. After all, it's a dangerous power… who knows how much dirt you've got on anyone else?

What's black, white and red all over?

Imagine strapping a GoPro to your head and running through *Mirror's Edge*, except with a katana and a laser rifle. And everyone's trying to kill you. And you can control time. That's the basic premise of *Superhot* – a game that's had a development journey more interesting than many of the triple-A games we've covered in the past.

Originally, the game was designed with three levels – in a prototype phase called 'The Challenge' – and focused on you running through a series of obstacles, and required to shoot various on-screen targets and enemies. The catch, though, was that time only moved when you did; take two steps forward, and time will progress two seconds. Think of it like *Braid*, but with a first-person view. Remember how tricky some of the puzzles in Jonathan Blow's 2D puzzler were? Well, *Superhot* is like that but with bullets instead of weird little heads.

You play as an unnamed agent, whose motives remain unclear. We don't know how or why he can control time, either – we just know that he *can*. Let's be honest though – a game with a mechanic this exploratory doesn't need to fall back too heavily on narrative; we're expecting a dialogue-lite campaign that culminates in some hardcore brain-teasery. Anything more would just seem bloated.

This mechanic allows you to go all *Matrix* and slow down time on a whim, judging the trajectory of incoming bullets and altering your movements to correct to their course. If you don't… well, it's game over – *Superhot* isn't a forgiving game; one bullet means death. Saying that, you can use your sword to slice incoming bullets in half, but that takes some serious skill. The satisfaction when you finally get one is palpable, though.

We mentioned *Braid* for a reason above – you'd think this was a game about twitch reflexes and blazing guns, but it's not. It's far more centred around solving puzzles and considering your movements within a 3D field. It's a fiendish game on the PC, and that's only in it's prototype phase.

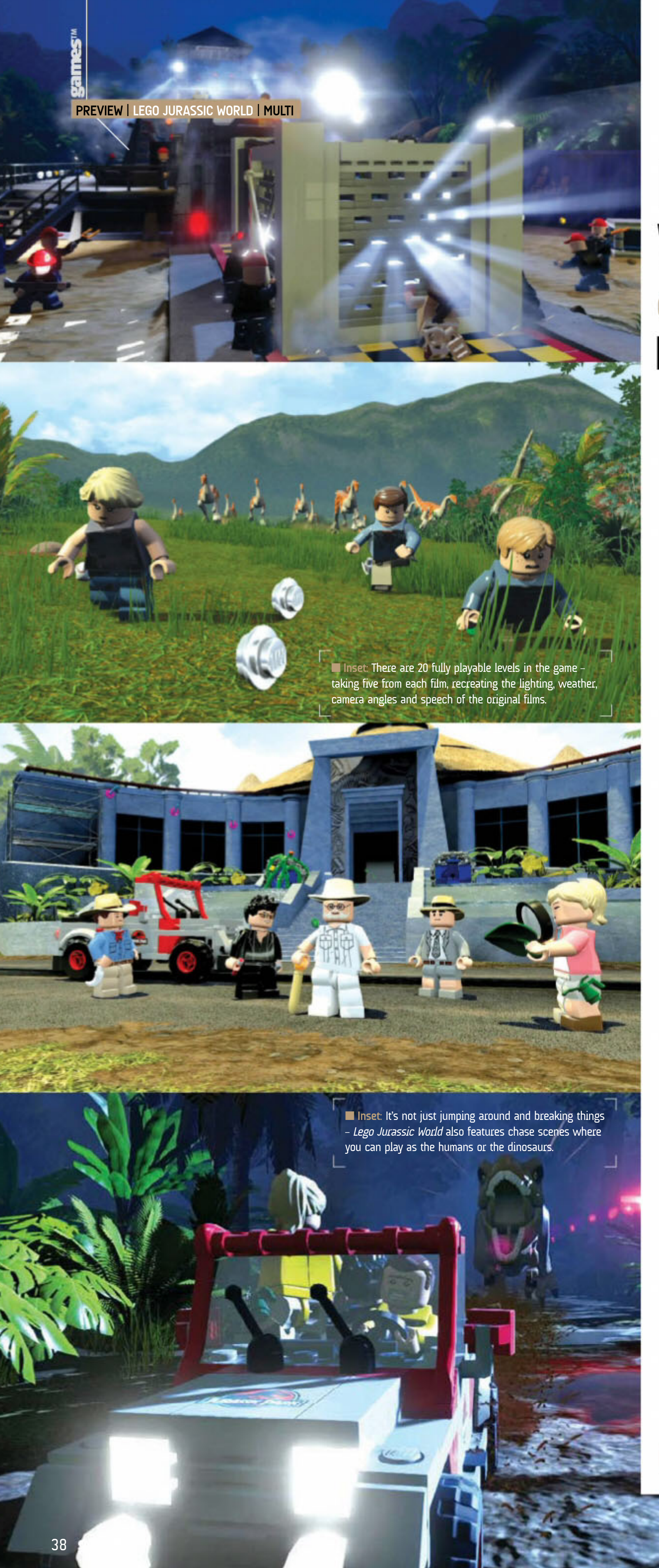
> "Gears Of War helmsman Cliff Bleszinski pledged enough money on Kickstarter to co-design a level"

The full release that's coming to Xbox One via the ID@Xbox program is likely to see some further tweaks and refinements – we're expecting new puzzles (sorry, we mean levels), refined pad support, and various new modes and features. *Gears Of War* helmsman Cliff Bleszinski pledged enough money on Kickstarter to win the position of co-designing a level, too, so the Xbox veteran will be making a (spiritual) return to the console when *Superhot* ships.

It's this kind of game that helps bolster the Xbox One's admittedly lacking stable of indie exclusives. The new ID@Xbox push (featuring *Space Engineers*, *Smite* and *Goat Simulator*) promises to reshape the indie side of the console war's battlefield. It's going to be a tight year for indie games on console.



■ Above: The minimalist setting and the colourised lighting engine both owe heavily to *Mirror's Edge* – an impression that is apparent throughout the game as a whole.



Inset: There are 20 fully playable levels in the game – taking five from each film, recreating the lighting, weather, camera angles and speech of the original films.

Inset: It's not just jumping around and breaking things – *Lego Jurassic World* also features chase scenes where you can play as the humans or the dinosaurs.

Lego Jurassic World

CONCEPT ■ Relive the original trilogy of *Jurassic Park* and the newest film in the series, *Jurassic World*, recreated with TT Games' typical Lego charm

Lego finds a way

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Release: June 2015
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Operating since 1990, Traveller's Tales has proved itself as a master of the licensed game – working with the likes of Sonic, Disney, *Star Wars*, *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, Marvel, DC and many, many others.

Developer History

Puggsy
1993 [Amiga, Mega-CD, Mega Drive]
Sonic R
1998 [Sega Saturn]
Lego Rock Band
2009 [PS3, 360, Wii, DS]
Lego Marvel Super Heroes
2013 [Multi]

High Point

Lego Marvel Super Heroes somehow managed to combine the vision of the increasingly budget-laden Marvel cinematic universe with the nuance and depth of the comic world; a must for any Marvel fan.

We just finished our hands-on with *Lego Jurassic World*, in which we charged around like an idiot, playing as a triceratops. We smashed things up into thousands of little Lego pieces, broke down gates and doors with our small plastic horns, and spent too long trying to run over a Lego rabbit (as it turns out, you can't run down Lego rabbits).

Lego Jurassic World continues that fun and incredibly playable formula that TT Games set out way back when, and began to really perfect with *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*. Amid complaints the studio does little to alter the core formula its games rely on, the developer has swung a total U-turn and taken on *dinosaurs*, for crying out loud – how much more different from superheroes can you get? We spoke to associate producer, Tim Wileman, about how *Lego Jurassic World* is changing TT Games' approach to development…

So what's been your favourite moment of the game so far?

I grew up with *Jurassic Park*, and… well, my favourite part of the game is in the T-Rex enclosure… The power's gone down in the Park and it's the first time you meet the T-Rex face to face, and when it comes through the fence in the game, it's raining and it's dark and you've got to interact with it… that suspense and atmosphere stands out to me the most so far.

***Jurassic World* is a bit of a departure from what TT is used to – what was the appeal behind the IP?**

The original *Jurassic Park* trilogy speaks for itself, I think – it's a series that enjoys iconic status. A game based on this property is something that I think a lot of film fans, as well as videogames fans, have wanted for

"It's been a labour of love incorporating all these Jurassic Park assets into the game to make it feel truly authentic"
TIM WILEMAN, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, TT GAMES

quite a while now. It's something we've wanted to do, as well, but have never really had the chance to work with for various reasons. With the new film coming out – and with [Stephen] Spielberg getting involved again – it reignited the excitement. We like staying as close to the original property as possible, you know; capturing the authenticity of these films with the dinosaurs and all the major scenes… It works really well with Lego.

And it's one of the first games for a while where you actually get the chance to play as a dinosaur, too…

We're very excited to give players that opportunity – there are 20 dinosaurs in the game that are playable, they've all got their own unique abilities, their own traits and characteristics, and that just makes them all come to life a little bit. Not only that, but we've got the Dinosaur Customizer as well, which is located in a nice little section of the island hub, and you can pull apart all of these dinosaurs and reform them however you please; there are *thousands* of combinations.

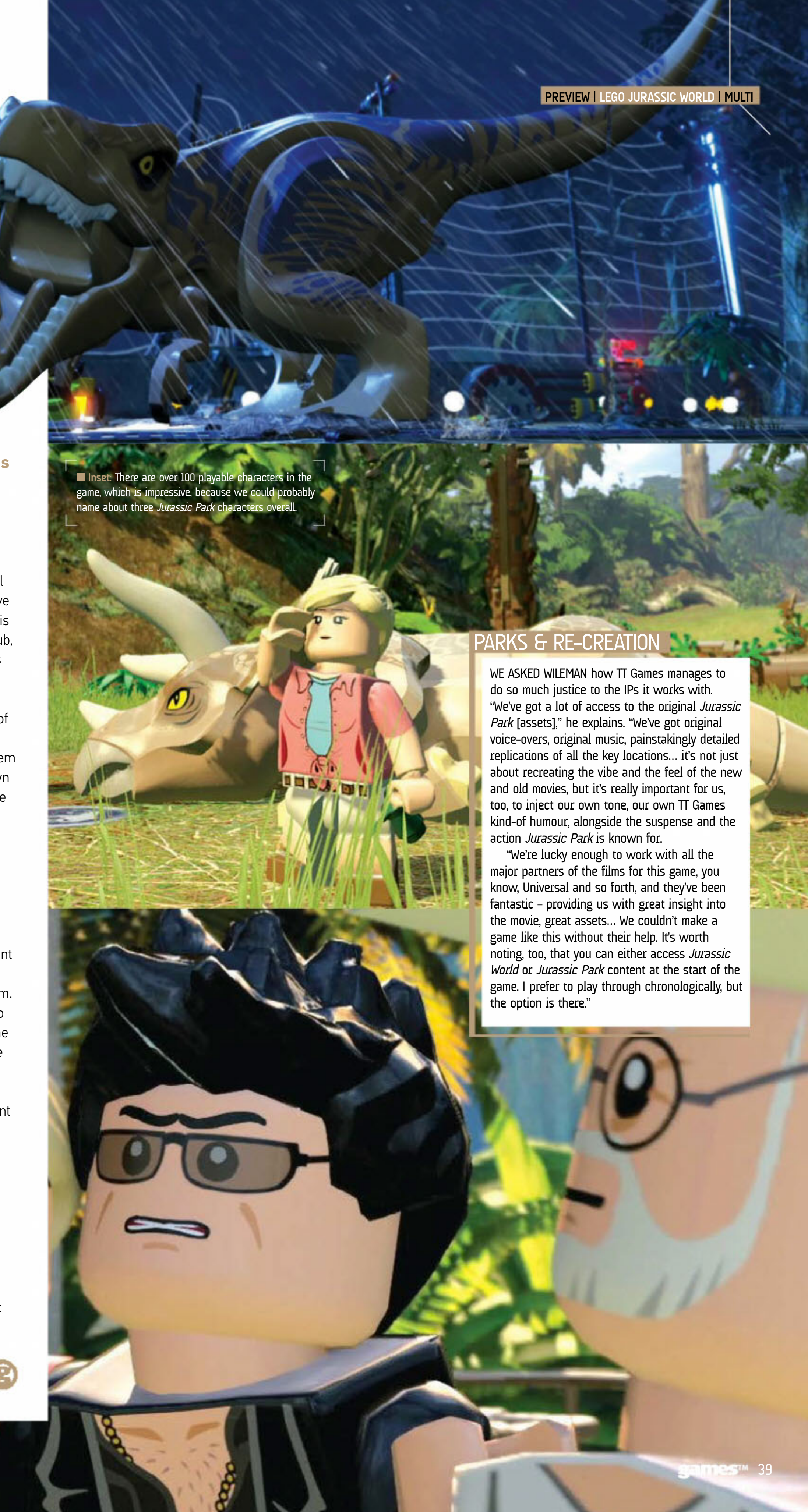
Not only can you change the visual style of them, but you can assign whatever abilities you want to them, too. Then you can take them back out into your hub and populate your own island with them – you can do battle with one another, unlock hidden areas with them and so much more.

It's kind of apt for a *Jurassic Park* game that you get to play god like that!

That's the thing in the films, you know, a [recurring] theme, and it's something we want to give our fans – not just the *content* from the films, but everything that surrounds them. Customisation is something we've wanted to do in our games for a while – it was top of the list when we were planning the game. We've also got the character customizer, as well, where you can create your own characters from the 100 [preloaded] ones to complement the dinosaurs you've created.

So now, more than ever, you're trying to give people a virtual Lego toolbox?

We're always trying to push the boundaries on these games; new features, new abilities – something *new* wherever we can. *Lego Jurassic World* is no different: we've really gone to town, and because the development team are massive fans of the franchise, it's been a labour of love incorporating all these *Jurassic Park* assets into the game to make it feel truly authentic.

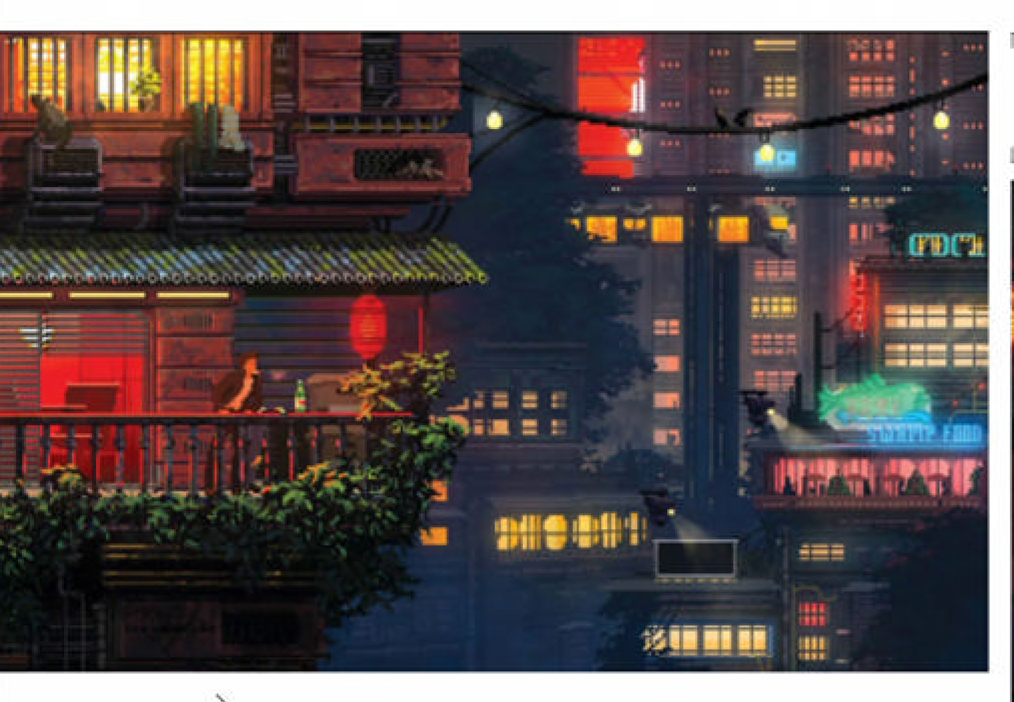


■ Inset: There are over 100 playable characters in the game, which is impressive, because we could probably name about three *Jurassic Park* characters overall.

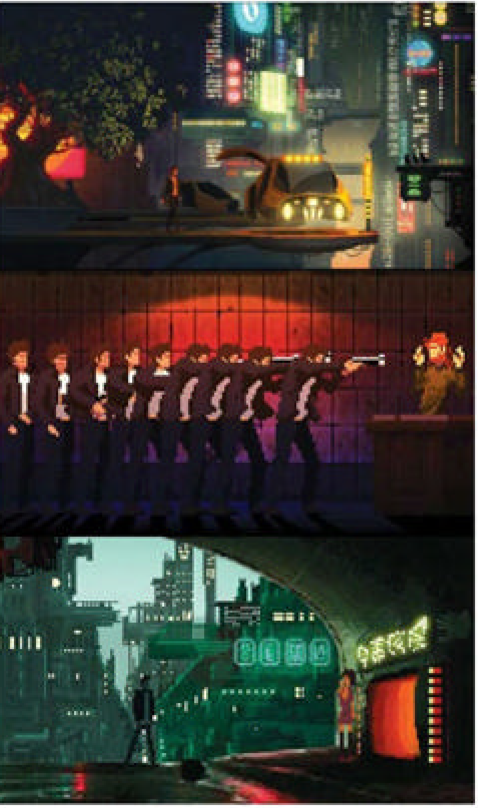
PARKS & RE-CREATION

WE ASKED WILEMAN how TT Games manages to do so much justice to the IPs it works with. "We've got a lot of access to the original *Jurassic Park* [assets]," he explains. "We've got original voice-overs, original music, painstakingly detailed replications of all the key locations… it's not just about recreating the vibe and the feel of the new and old movies, but it's really important for us, too, to inject our own tone, our own TT Games kind-of humour, alongside the suspense and the action *Jurassic Park* is known for.

"We're lucky enough to work with all the major partners of the films for this game, you know, Universal and so forth, and they've been fantastic – providing us with great insight into the movie, great assets… We couldn't make a game like this without their help. It's worth noting, too, that you can either access *Jurassic World* or *Jurassic Park* content at the start of the game. I prefer to play through chronologically, but the option is there."



■ Left: We don't often consider how much lighting can affect the tone and feel of a pixel art game, but one look at *The Last Night* shows how important it can be. Below: The game isn't ashamed to wear its inspirations on its sleeve, and we're glad – it's been too long since we've seen a developer attempt to tackle the cinematic platformer genre.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac, PS4
Origin: France
Publisher: Odd Tales
Developer: In-house
Release: 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Tim and Adrien Soret began making *The Last Night* for the Cyberpunk Jam in 2014 – a game jam they ended up winning. The prototype was coded, illustrated and published within six days, and thanks to the attention it received, the brothers decided to start working on making *The Last Night* a full release. With music from Perturbator (*Hotline Miami*) complementing the dark, retro-futuristic city, and a good understanding of the Unity engine, the brothers are currently attempting to crowd-fund the game on Kickstarter.

The Last Night

CONCEPT ■ In a cyberpunk future, a city with four districts is home to some… unsavoury characters. You're a noir protagonist, and you've got a gun. That can only mean one thing, right?

Blade Runner meets Another World in a cyberpunk city

The train pulls into the station and we slink off onto the sidewalk. We're in a city – high rise flats and sodium lights flicker behind us, and in the foreground a woman smokes a cigarette while two others chat. They don't notice our presence. The train (which looks like something that's come from *Final Fantasy XIII* via *Blade Runner*) flickers in a blur of red and green neon – a vibrant flash of colour against the smoky shading of the rest of the game.

"You're late," says some guy with a quiff, blocking our passage to the next screen. "This is your target, you'll find him in the nightclub." A translucent blue hologram pops up in front of us. That's all we need to know. We get on our way. The next screen has floating traffic buzzing around a road, each vehicle uniquely lit and detailed. The pixel art style reminds us of the ridiculous levels of detail you'd see in *Sword & Sworcery*, mixed with the natural palettes of *Papers, Please*. Your character walks (and looks) exactly like the protagonist of *Another World*, but that's intentional.

Odd Tales is trying to recapture that cinematic platform feel that was so predominant in the Nineties – think *Oddworld*, *Flashback*, and *Blackthorne*. It's a genre that's not really been too popular since – the budding 3D graphics of systems at the time distracted developers' attention, it seems, and the genre was left in stasis, its glory days firmly behind it. Thing is, the cinematic platformer had reached its peak – we knew what to expect from the likes of the *Oddworld* franchise: environmental storytelling, graphics that punched above the weight of the systems at the time and some really hardcore gameplay that would reward the players that invested in them.

The Last Night has been built with those developmental pillars in mind, but rather than the pre-rendered backgrounds or rotoscoped animations that defined its predecessors, *The Last Night* is opting for a more retro feel with its pixel art and a visual direction that puts some of the lazier attempts at cyberpunk noir to shame. With parallax mapping, layered environments and fluid animations, *The Last Night* hits upon everything that made the cinematic platformers great.

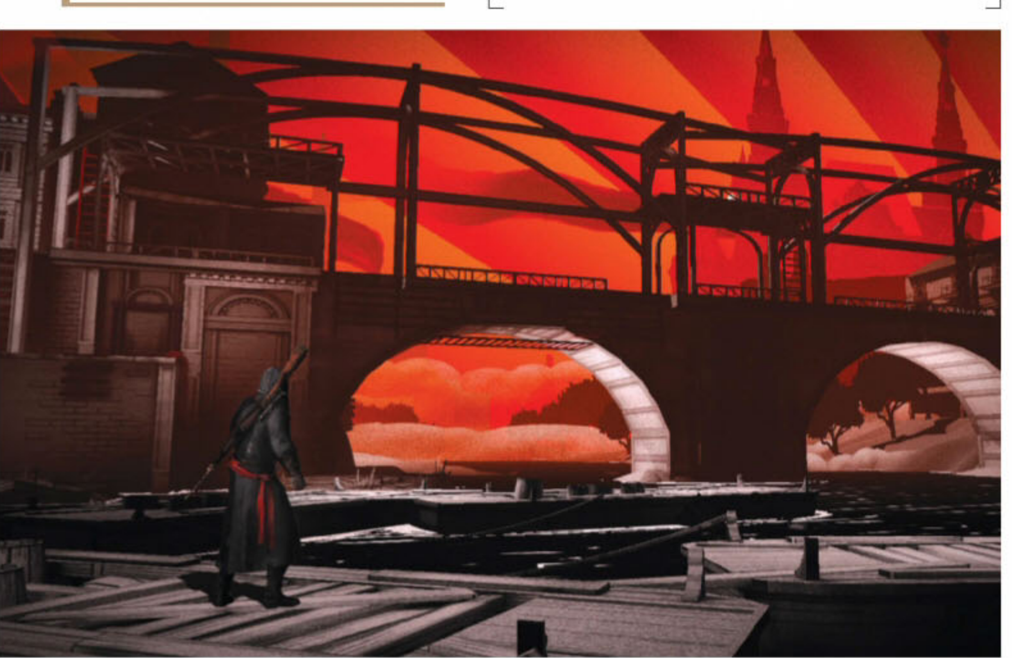
But what's the point of a game that looks great without some tactile gameplay to back it up? *The Last Night* brings in modern gaming elements to an old genre – you've got divergent dialogue options to help you understand your objectives (and the world) in more depth; you've got the option to hack droids, pilot drones and take to the road to evade your pursuers; you can negotiate in difficult situations to give you more time to tackle puzzles. It's a fully thought-out adventure game, in the truest sense of the genre.

> "We want to revive the forgotten cinematic platformer genre. We want to pursue the tradition of Another World, Flashback, and Oddworld"
>
> PRESS RELEASE ODD TALES

EXTENDED UNIVERSE

FANS OF THE BROADER *Assassin's Creed* world may well already recognise our heroes in *Chronicles* as each has already appeared in some fashion elsewhere. Shao Jun appeared in the animated *Assassin's Creed: Embers* alongside Ezio Auditore, while Arbaaz Mir and Nikolaï Orelov both starred in the graphic novel series. These games, while interconnected, will also tie up some of the story lines from these individual appearances. It's good to see Ubisoft making better use of this wider universe as it seeks to build some depth to the *Creed* roster and experiment with some gameplay within the brand. We also fully expect more comics, novels and animations in the coming months and years.

Right: The India and Russia segments of the trilogy are expected to be released this coming autumn and will be connected in plot to China, even though they are set many years later.





Left: We particularly love the look of *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: Russia* with its propaganda poster colouring and dark, silhouetted figures.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Climax Studios
Release: April 2015 (Q3 2015)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Climax has been in the business of making games for nearly two decades and in that time it's made about as wide a variety of titles as you could ask for. From *MotoGP 2* (one of the best reviewed in the series) to *Silent Hill* spin-offs, Climax has done pretty much everything.

Developer History

Sudeki
2004 [Xbox, PC]
Ghost Rider
2007 [PS2]
Silent Hill: Shattered Memories
2009 [Wii, PS2, PSP]
Rocket Knight
2010 [Multi]

High Point

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories stands out as one of the best titles Climax has released to date, having built well on the experience of making *Silent Hill: Origins*. It was quirky for a *Silent Hill*, but very interesting.

Assassin's Creed Chronicles

CONCEPT ■ Split into three parts set in China, India and Russia, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* is a 2.5D digital spin-off from the main *Creed* series

The first steps to redemption

How often do we see 2.5D done right? Not that often, we would suggest. Too often it's about 3D sprites and parallax backgrounds, but that extra half a dimension is rather lost. It may as well be a flat game. Not so with *Assassin's Creed Chronicles*, which on top of a number of becoming qualities appears to understand that 2.5D opens up a whole bag of new tricks to play with.

The key is that it can give real depth to a fixed camera game and that's what Climax Studios has done with this episodic adventure in the *Creed* universe. Buildings can have multiple layers moving towards and away from the screen, they can have corners that turn the world around not unlike *Fez*, and they can have contours and ledges that can be grabbed and spun round. Making good use of the half-dimension can add dynamism to what might otherwise be a fairly well-trodden genre, as can a nice art style and concept.

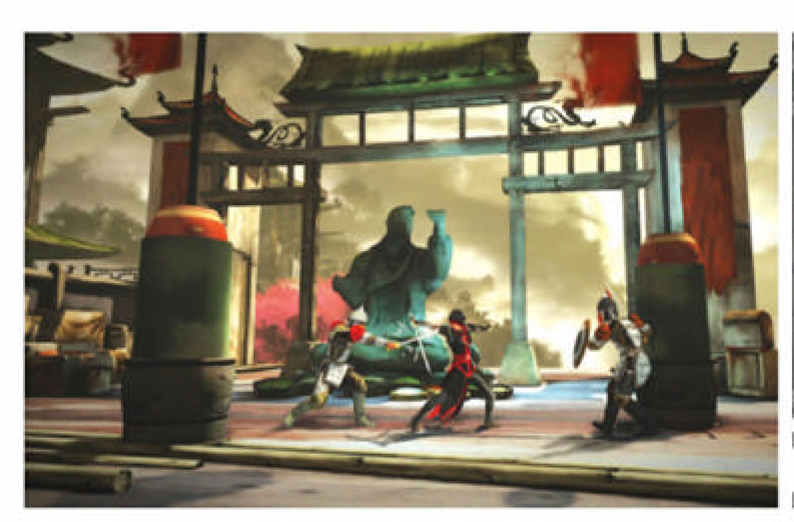
An interesting feature to *Chronicles* is that its three parts will each be set in a different country and as a result the team behind it has decided to give each a look that befits that nation. *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* features fluid, sweeping, impressionistic ink styling. The follow-up, *India*, has bright, rich spaces, full of colour. And finally *Chronicles: Russia* is an almost black and white world with splashes of red to represent the communist revolution setting. There's a definite Soviet propaganda poster vibe to it all. This gives all three episodes a unique feel and gives them something identifiable in the increasingly monotone world of *Assassin's Creed*. There may be life in the series yet with this kind of approach to style and character in upcoming spin-off games. It's a very promising step to see Ubisoft making and an endeavour helped by having outsiders from the series, Climax Studios, at the helm.

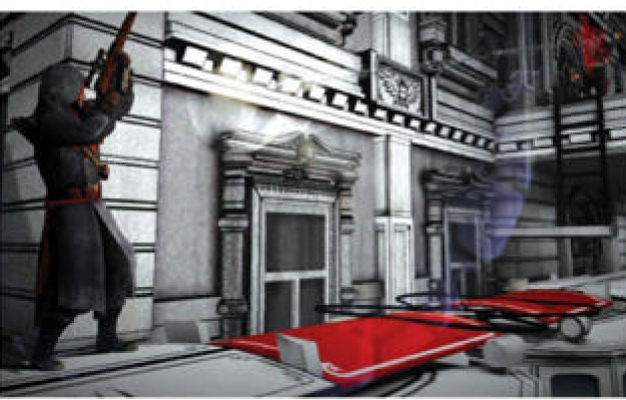
/// And Ubisoft is likely to be hoping that this brief sojourn in the world of action and adventure from a side view will cleanse the pallet of *Unity* players still reeling from the punishment they took from last year's calamitous experience. This is the hors d'oeuvres that will let us try out some new flavours before a hopefully satisfying main course. The team behind *Chronicles* is promising that it will have plenty of *Creed* lore to enjoy, the main characters all having appeared elsewhere in the universe before and all having something tying this episodic story together even though their individual motivations and interests are very different.

> "Each chapter is a new beginning and comes with a unique hero from the Assassin's Creed universe in a never-seen-before setting"
> PRESS RELEASE UBISOFT

As are the styles of the characters themselves. Shao Jun is the lead of the China portion of the series and is looking to revive her lost Brotherhood of assassin's as the last remaining member of her group. Meanwhile the adventures you'll experience in India and Russia involve fathers looking to protect their children in the midst of revolutionary violence and the pursuit of Templars holding onto legendary artifacts. Each of the three heroes has a signature weapon and abilities unique to them, which should mean each game, while playing from the same perspective, still feels a little different. Shao Jun's portion, for instance, is looking a lot like *Mark Of The Ninja*, while our Russian hero Nikolaï Orelov has a long-range rifle that lets you pick of enemies at a distance. A curious choice for a 2.5D game and one we look forward to exploring later this year.

What we've seen so far of *Chronicles* has impressed us with a good mix of fluid parkour platforming, not too dissimilar from the *Mirror's Edge* iOS game from a few years back, and some nice stealth that's similar to the aforementioned *Mark Of The Ninja*. What will likely set this trilogy apart from other games we've enjoyed before is the way it's approaching that art style and giving each segment its own identity. It's a fun choice to make and could really help elevate the games overall once we've experienced them all. How these three games could tie together is tough to imagine, but we're interested to find out.





■ Left: Combat doesn't look too dissimilar from the main *Assassin's Creed* series with parrying forming a large part of your approach to a fight, however, projectile dodging is also a major factor in some battles.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

UMBRA

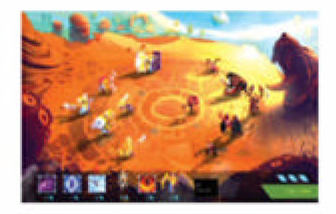
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Solarfall Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



IT'S INCREDIBLE what some indie developers are able to achieve with a little hard work, dedication and access to the latest build of Crytek's CryEngine. The latest build of *Umbra* was shown off at GDC and it looks seriously impressive. On the surface *Umbra* might look like another *Diablo II* clone, but there's so much more going on; from a gorgeous open world, procedural skills and weapons and a rather nifty asymmetrical inventory system.

DUELYST

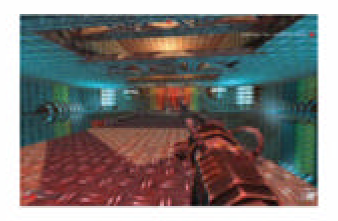
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Counterplay Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



THE SAD truth about Kickstarter is that it can often turn into a black hole of recycled ideas and ambitious but undeliverable promises. That's why it's worth focusing on the games that truly impress. *Duelyst* is the coming together of deceptively complex tactical games, such as *Hero Academy* and *Hearthstone*, with the maddening intensity of competitive turn-based RPGs. It plays fantastically, and you can sign up for the beta right now.

BEDLAM

Format: **PC, Xbox One**
Publisher: **RedBedlam**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



DO YOU long for a return to the simpler days of FPS gaming from the Eighties and Nineties? This era-jumping shooter, based on a novel by Christopher Brookmyre, might be exactly what you're after. Every location in *Bedlam* is inspired by a famous FPS franchise – from the deadly arenas of *Quake II* to the frantic action of *Call Of Duty*. It's currently available through Steam Early Access and is proving to offer a surprisingly good time.

ORION TRAIL

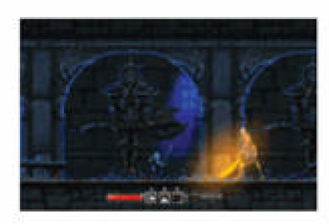
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Schell Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



ORION TRAIL might not be the most original game out there – looking like a blend of *FTL: Faster Than Light* and *Star Command* – but there's certainly something enticing about punishingly difficult pixel-art space sims that we just cannot get enough of. The early build we've had a chance to play has proven to be fun, though it's clear *Orion Trail* won't be for everyone – despite the humour throughout, it has a wicked hard learning curve.

SLAIN!

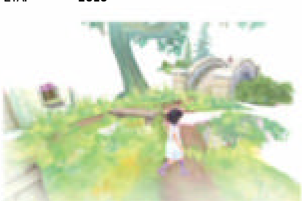
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Wolf Brew Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



OF ALL the 'homages' we've seen on Kickstarter recently, Wolf Brew Games is the closest we've seen a start-up get to recreating the glory days of the hack and slash genre. *Slain!* is giving us serious *Castlevania* flashbacks; Bathoryn moves like a Belmont, fights demons like a Belmont and gets killed *a lot*, just like a Belmont. Seven areas, great combat, and a gorgeous gothic horror aesthetic, what's not to like?

BEYOND EYES

Format: **PC, Xbox One, PS4**
Publisher: **Team 17**
Developer: **Tiger & Squid**
ETA: **2015**



IT'S HARD to believe that we used to consider Team 17 as 'the studio that made *Worms*' because the publisher has really grasped the potential of indie development over the last 12 months. Take *Beyond Eyes*, a title that aims to give you a sense of how a blind person might navigate the world. Using your other senses, you'll visualise and form environments around you as a young blind girl searching for her lost cat.

SWORDY

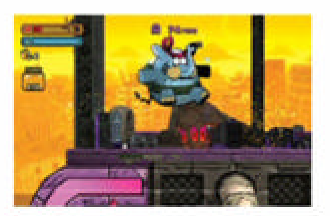
Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Frogshark**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



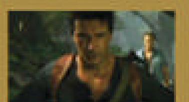
SOMETIMES, IT'S the simple things that provide the most entertainment. Take *Swordy*, a local multiplayer-only, physics-driven brawler that tasks eight players with hitting one another in the face until they explode. It's chaotic, challenging and one of those unique ID@Xbox experiences that Chris Charla keeps going on about. Build momentum with the thumbsticks and bring the pain down on your friends.

TEMBO THE BADASS ELEPHANT

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Game Freak**
ETA: **2015**



WE'RE NOT sure where to start with this one. So, *Pokémon* developer Game Freak teamed up with Sega to produce this mental side-scrolling action game where the last line of defence against a villainous army is "the peanut chompin', villain stompin', Phantom romping badass Elephantidae, Tembo The Badass Elephant." It's the most chaotically awesome thing we've heard all month, and it'll be out this summer.



DELAYED – Uncharted 4: A Thief's End (PS4)

Well this is just bad news all around. Sony has delayed *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* until Spring 2016 in order to give Naughty Dog enough time to properly realise its vision. We suppose we'll have to wait.

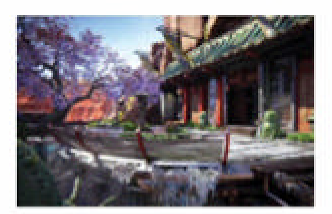


DELAYED – Project CARS (Multiformat)

What's going on with *Project CARS*? Despite being "99.9%" complete, it's been delayed once again, this time until mid-May. Alarm bells are ringing, but let's hope this is just precautionary.

PROJECT BLUESTREAK

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Nexon**
Developer: **Boss Key**
ETA: **2016**



JUST BECAUSE Cliffy B is no longer working at Epic doesn't mean he isn't still capable of blowing us away. The ex-*Gears Of War* developer is currently putting together a back-to-basics arena shooter and we've had a first look at his new Unreal Engine 4-powered game world. It looks incredible, boasting some of the finest graphics we've seen so far this generation. It just goes to show, you don't need a huge studio behind you to realise your dreams.

SMITE

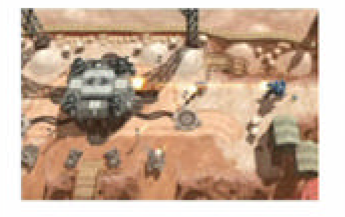
Format: **Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **Hi-Rez Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



HI-REZ STUDIOS is currently preparing to launch its *Smite* beta on Xbox One this summer, but we had a little peek into its progress with access to the early Alpha. We might have been initially dubious as to how the popular MOBA would translate to a gamepad, but our time with the game has proven to be entirely entertaining. The studio isn't stripping back *Smite* for Xbox One, if anything, it's enhancing it. We highly recommend you sign up for the beta before it's too late.

AIRMECH ARENA

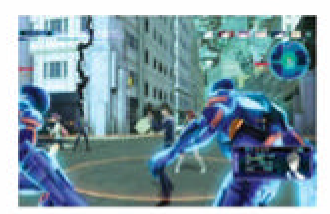
Format: **PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Carbon Games**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



POPULAR FREE-TO-PLAY RTS/ action hybrid *AirMech Arena* is coming to Xbox One and PS4 this spring following a successful stint on PC and Xbox 360. This will be the first time an *AirMech* game has appeared on a PlayStation platform so let us go over the basics: players control one of nine AirMechs – basically Transformers – build armies, and duke it out in single-player, four-player co-op, or six-player versus modes.

LOST DIMENSION

Format: **PS3, PS Vita**
Publisher: **Atlus, NIS America**
Developer: **Lancarse**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



LOST DIMENSION is one of those RPGs that we never expected to be localised the West, but Atlus has once again saved the day. It's worth keeping an eye on *Lost Dimension*, because it has a unique take on the tactical RPG genre. 11 psychic cadets, one deadly world-ending threat and traitors in your midst. That's right, the game randomly assigns traitors to your squad, so you could be taken down from the inside at any time.

NEVERMIND

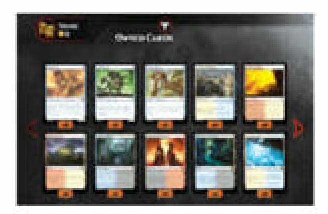
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **Flying Mollusk**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



STARTING LIFE as a thesis project by way of inspiration from games like *Myst*, *Nevermind* sends you deep into the thoughts and psyches of psychological trauma victims to investigate and help heal their minds. You play as a Neuroprober physician, exploring the dark and twisted corners of the mind and hopefully not losing yours in the meantime. It's looking dark, terrifying and utterly compelling.

MAGIC DUELS: ORIGINS

Format: **Xbox One, PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Wizards Of The Coast**
Developer: **Stainless Games**
ETA: **Q2 2015**



WIZARDS OF The Coast is rebranding *Magic: The Gathering* and its popular TCG adaptation for a new audience here. If you've played any entries in the *Duels Of The Planeswalkers* series, you'll know what to expect – only *Magic Duels: Origins* will also be free-to-play. Following the success of *Hearthstone*, we aren't surprised to see other developers follow suit, we just hope Wizards can handle monetisation fairly.

SUPER DUNGEON BROS!

Format: **PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **React! Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Late 2015**



COMBINING HEAVY metal and dungeon crawling is something we can get behind, so we're happy to see *Super Dungeon Bros!* progressing well. This rock-themed, four-player co-op brawler will have you and your friends fighting through randomised dungeons, working together to overcome puzzles and, of course, fighting anything that moves. There's also cross-play between PC and PS4.

EDGE OF ETERNITY

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **Midgar Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



DO YOU spend all day bemoaning the direction *Final Fantasy* games have taken over the decade? In that case, do yourself a favour and check out *Edge Of Eternity*. This is an indie JRPG with some serious talent behind it. The world looks genuinely incredible, the turn-based battle system looks ripped from *Final Fantasy VIII* and, well, what more could you possibly want? Expect a 2016 release, because Kickstarter.



THE VR VERDICT

THE HTC VIVE, THE OCULUS RIFT AND SONY'S MORPHEUS – THE THREE OF THEM ARE TAKING GAMING TOWARDS VIRTUAL REALITY ENLIGHTENMENT. WITH THE SAMSUNG GEAR PROTECTING THE MOBILE VR VANGUARD, THE INDUSTRY IS READY TO BE TAKEN INTO A VIRTUAL WORLD. **GAMES™** SAT DOWN WITH PATRICK O'LUANAIGH, CEO OF NDREAMS, VR-SPECIFIC STUDIO THE VIRTUAL TO TALK ABOUT REVOLUTION

We've just been skydiving. Except, we haven't; we've been lying on our chest, over a chair, looking down, with an Oculus Rift strapped to our head. "You've got to step over the edge," Patrick O'Luanaigh tells us, he's the CEO of nDreams (more on that later) and used to be creative director at Eidos Interactive, and head of external development at Codemasters. He's watching us on-screen, not that we know that, of course, since we're very much embroiled in this terrifying virtual experience.

"Go on, jump!"

We push forward on the stick – that's right, we're still using a 360 pad – and look down. We begin to plummet. Layers of clouds fly past us, and floating islands of rock whizz past our heads. You can hear them go by, in 3D sound through the headphones. We're told we get more points if we skim as close as possible to the rocks, so we look to our left, edging closer. It almost feels like we're going to graze the skin off our elbows.

We plummet further, picking up velocity, nosediving, righting, and constantly looking around. There's a 360 degree field of vision here – we can see the floating rocks we've bypassed if we look up, and the (fast approaching) ground below if we look down. We prepare for impact; we actually close our eyes. As we hit the ground, O'Luanaigh taps the front of our headset, giving a kinetic shock to the visual impact. We flinch, he laughs. VR is terrifying.

"When Valve did its original VR demo, it produced this experience where you stood there, on a plank of wood over a massive chasm – like the Death Star – and you're looking down… and the game tells you to step to the left," O'Luanaigh explains as we remove the headset, a little shaken. "'Well, no', you say. But your brains is like 'You know you're in a room, you know you're on a carpet, you know this is safe. Step off.' You *know* that, but it's just too real and you can't jump. It's lovely – your brain is telling you that you've got a headset on, but, somehow, you really believe that you just might fall."

Lovely isn't the word we'd have used at the time, but O'Luanaigh is right – it's a strange experience. Our last experience with VR before visiting nDreams was with an Oculus Rift DK1 (that's Development Kit One). It didn't have positional head tracking, which is the main cause of the so-called 'simulator sickness' a lot of frontier gamers suffer with when trying out this tech, and we weren't hugely sold on it.

> "Your brain tells you you've got a headset on, but somehow you believe you just might fall"

After playing around with the Oculus Rift DK2, and the mobile VR headset Samsung Gear, though, our hearts have been swayed. We've been converted to the VR revolution. All the naysayers riffing on the old 'It's the 3DTV of gaming' gimmick? They're wrong.

"I think, largely, you can have the same experience with a 3D film as you do with a 2D film – the technology doesn't really further anything or change anything," explains O'Luanaigh, when we ask him about the oft-cited comparisons. "With VR, the difference is *huge*. When you use the [Steam VR], Vive, you don't go 'Oh yeah, this game's a little better for being in VR', you go '*Holy shit*, this is new, I've never seen this before in my life!' [laughs] I don't think I've ever seen anyone come »

● From left to right: the Samsung Gear VR, the Morpheus and the Oculus Rift. They may all look similar, but the three headsets couldn't be more different inside…

We spoke to nDreams; CEO, Patrick O'Luanaigh and VP of marketing, David Corless.

away from a 3DTV saying 'This will change *everything*, you know? I don't think VR is a gimmick, I really don't."

It's refreshing to hear O'Luanaigh say that – we're guilty of approaching the VR industry with scepticism ourselves; let's be honest, as gamers we've had a fairly rough wide with new tech. When Microsoft first announced Project Natal (which would go on to become the Kinect we all know and, um, love?), the publisher promised it would change the way we gamed. We thought the Wii and its nunchucks would alter gaming for good, too. As it happened, it came and went, gave us some good games, but was largely a gimmick. We're burnt out, tired of false promises, tired of the same experiences that are trotted out on every new bit of technology.

VR has more going in its favour, though – it's arrived in the industry around the time that we're seeing game-makers deconstruct the typical industry cycle. The triple-As are getting bigger, battling only with themselves, leaving the indies to hit the niches that Activision or Ubisoft or EA are leaving open. This applies to VR, too – smaller, more mobile studios can afford to take risks, experiment, alter the narrative of game development.

"If VR happened ten years ago when it was all big publishers doing things how they used to be done, things would be very different," O'Luanaigh tells us. And his past in Eidos and Codemasters gives us confidence in his opinon on the matter. Up until about 18 months ago, nDreams was focused on PlayStation Home, and has had preliminary experience working with virtual worlds that, really, was the perfect training ground for a studio-wide VR shift. It was a prototype stage for the company – an area it could experiment with business models, learn what people liked.

"There'll be a really nice blend in the VR stores, just like there is on Steam"

"As it happens, VR has come at the time of games as a service – and self-publishing, KickStarter, Steam Early Access. It's not just £39.99 triple-A titles; there's a massive mix and access to everything – from one hour experiences to two hours, four hours, eight hours… There'll be a really nice blend in the VR stores, just like there is on Steam […] that


George Kelion, nDreams communications manager, shows the Morpheus headset.



It Scans Darkly

Does VR's negative perception have its roots in sci-fi fiction?

There has been a tentative fear around VR ever since the early Nineties, when headsets began to make appearances in custom-built arcades – the most notable making its home in London's Trocadero centre. But why does VR have such a stigma attached to it, with commentary on VR being apocalyptic, bleak, disparaging? Just look at Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, look at *Shadowrun*, at *The Island*, *The Matrix*, *Technomancer* and *Snow Crash*… they all share a theme and that theme, alas, is misery. George Kelion, communications manager at nDreams, offers some interesting insight.

"Look at iPads, right? A lot of the great tech we've had in the last ten years has been the realisation of certain sci-fi fantasies; the iPads are basically databoards from *Star Trek*. And *Star Trek* was a very positive sci-fi programme for a very positive era; in the Seventies the attitude seemed to be 'Future tech is brilliant! In the Eighties, though, it wasn't like that. The sci-fi writing in the Eighties was *all* dystopic. Cyberpunk itself is dystopic by definition. So when writers and authors talk about how VR tech could realise these sci-fi futures, those futures themselves have always been dark… I imagine the lens through which a lot of commentators analyse and predict and socialise VR comes from these original VR stories: they're of a particular place and time, they're dark, they're pessimistic. I think that's why VR has the [mainstream] media reputation it does."

● Expect VR games to hit the same production values as triple-A games.



means VR developers don't *all* have to be doing *Eve: Valkyrie* or *Alien: Isolation*. It also means you don't *have* to be doing small one/two-man indie stuff."

The only hands-on experiences we'd really had proper time with when it comes to VR were with the games O'Luanaigh mentioned above – we were lucky enough to get some time with the *Alien: Isolation* demo running on Oculus (it's *horrific*) and we probably spent a bit too long gawking at the twinkling cosmos from an *Eve: Valkyrie* cockpit. The thing is, those games – and a lot of the others that are making a name in VR – are all first-person, or in a contained area, like the aforementioned cockpit. Won't that begin to get boring in, what, around a year? Can VR do more than first-person and horror?

"Absolutely!" replies O'Luanaigh. "Some of the best experiences we've been playing with are actually what [our developers call] 'diorama games' – if you imagine a big diorama, like the things you'd see in a museum, or even Warhammer – those kind of things work *fantastically* well in VR. You can move your head in, look closely at your units, pick people up… that feeling of seeing something so small and moving people around from god-view is incredible. Imagine RTS or tower defence games in this diorama!

"Even slightly more traditional third-person adventure games work nicely, too. We've demoed something similar that worked out alright, and I know Oculus has got a game called *Lucky's Tale* that has a third-person view. Everyone assumes VR experiences will be through the eyes, but that's not all we can do – it'll be a real mix, I think."

On that note, one of the first things O'Luanaigh showed us when we visited the nDreams studio was the Gear VR – which is basically a Samsung S6 slotted into a purpose-built Oculus shell.

"There's a massive difference between mobile VR and PC-powered VR," O'Luanaigh explains as we turn the Gear VR over in our hands, honestly a little in wonder. "That's where the biggest gap is. Therefore, the games and experiences we make for mobile *have* to be smaller than the PC experiences because… bless it, it does such a good job for its size, and it's got such an impressive screen, and I think what we've got with the Gear is great, but it's never going to be photorealistic, it's never going to do as many polys as PC."

We were amazed by how a little phone like this could generate VR. We played *Perfect Beach* – which is more of a traditional app than a game; an experience that had you sat on one of three beaches, with your own music on, chilling out. That was it, that was the point of the game. "Imagine this on your commute – you've just had a crazy day and you want to unwind," O'Luanaigh posits, "strap this on, when you're on the tube or something, and you can get away for a bit, really help yourself relax." The graphics actually put us in mind of *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* – understandable, relatable and stylised, but not really realistic or 'uncanny'. For a phone, though, running two eyes' worth of graphic data, it was impressive.

Though *Perfect Beach* is a really relaxing experience (there's even a 'Meditate' option if you really want to get into your virtual zen place), we were still sceptical that people would actually want to do that on a train. With the whole 'glasshole' backlash that accompanied the Google Glass, is it likely people will adopt VR willingly in public? Tuning into a new world in your own home is different – no-one can see you there, there's no shame – but on a bus or a train… we were dubious.

"The headsets will get cheaper, and the mobile headsets in particular will get lighter and easier [to use], and they'll get positional tracking, too," O'Luanaigh explains, when we ask him about the problem with usability in public. "Even the Oculus and the Morpheus and the Vive will get lighter and smaller and easier over the next few years, they'll get more wireless, too! But this is a great starting point, I'm really optimistic for VR, I really am. I'm convinced it's going to catch on."

> "Imagine this on your commute… you want to rewind… strap this on, and you can relax"

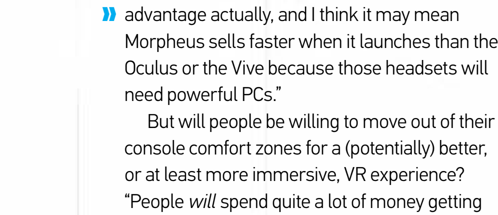
'Catch on'. It's an interesting turn of phrase for VR, because that's what a lot of the movement's success depends on: adoption rate. With the likes of the Vive and the Oculus Rift requiring an *incredibly* high-end computer to run, it's unlikely the majority of gamers (based on console) will want to invest. The Morpheus, however, has the advantage of already having a potential player base of 18.5 million people [as of January 2015].

"Every PS4 is the same," states O'Luanaigh. "[As a developer], you know that every single person wearing Morpheus VR will be able to get a headset, plug it in and be off. That's a big »





The futuristic visage of VR might soon become a domestic reality.



advantage actually, and I think it may mean Morpheus sells faster when it launches than the Oculus or the Vive because those headsets will need powerful PCs."

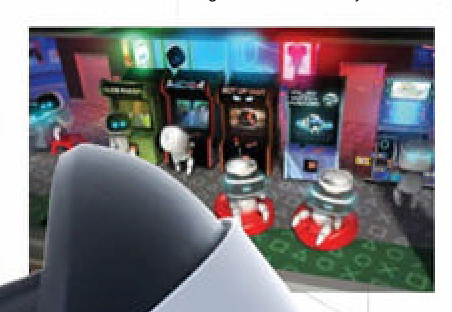
But will people be willing to move out of their console comfort zones for a (potentially) better, or at least more immersive, VR experience? "People *will* spend quite a lot of money getting the right PCs and the hardware up-front eventually, and the average PC will come down in price in the long run, but right away? You're going to need a beefy PC and be a gamer that enjoys running a top-end gaming computer to take advantage of it, whereas the Morpheus is something everybody can use."

With developers and publishers looking at taking advantage of existing markets, it's essential that the people working on VR now make the launch games immediately accessible. That's a big task – after all, aside from a few VR arcades in the Nineties, VR hasn't really been publicly available before, and that means there are a lot of starting points that need to be worked from in order to appease an already sceptical audience. This new wave of VR needs to distance itself from the past.

"Even though we've been working with VR for 18 months now, we've still got an R&D department working around the clock looking at all the new things we want to try," O'Luanaigh explains. "We keep getting new hardware, so even when it's things like the Vive – moving around in the headset suddenly introduces new solutions to problems we had, so there are still so many things we're getting better at, even at this early stage."

"There are still so many things we're getting better at, even in this early stage"

Movement is one of the trickiest things VR has to get right in order to succeed – developers can't simply rely on sticking a pad in the players hands; aside from not being able to see the thing at all, it also takes away from the feeling that you're *in* the game. The Vive, at least, has built-in tech that allows you to see your limb placement in-game, but that's not a standard for the other headsets. nDreams, it could be argued, is writing the rulebook when it comes to addressing how these different VR challenges are being tackled.



The Reality of the Situation

There's a lot going on in the VR world right now, and while the tech isn't exactly hidden behind closed doors, it's rare that people get to experience exactly what each headset can do and see precisely what they're capable of. We asked Patrick O'Luanaigh to explain in his own words the pros and cons of each headset...

Sony's Morpheus

PROS

"I think the biggest advantage the Sony Morpheus has is that it will be plug and play: if you've got a PS4, which is one of the fastest selling consoles ever, so lots of people do have it, you can just plug [the Morpheus] in and you don't have to worry about anything – no PC, no Spec."

"You've got the DualShock 4, too, which is wireless, can be used for positional tracking – along with the PlayStation Camera – which is brilliant; it's not like a keyboard and a mouse, you've got the trackpad and you know where all the buttons are at all times. If anyone's still got a couple of Move controllers in their house, too, they're wonderful to use with the headset."

CONS

"It's hard to say, really, but I guess the PlayStation Network [PSN] is a bit more closed than the other platforms, so it might be more difficult for devs to get their software onto the Morpheus than other platforms.

"There are a lot of ways of moving in VR, so we've done a lot of work and a lot of user testing trying to find out if there's a 'comfort mode' we can create for new players that'll make it easier for them to understand. Gamers might prefer to just switch to the controller, though, so we're figuring out how that works, too.

"We've spent the last 18 months experimenting with all sorts of things – I think we've made about 40 prototypes [at nDreams] in all. We're experimenting with things… Like sticking your head through a wall, right? You don't want the player to be made to stop moving their head because that feels quite weird and can cause simulator sickness, but then you don't really want players sticking their heads through wall or ceiling [meshes], so what's the answer there?"

We'd been discussing the potential future of VR with O'Luanaigh all day, talking about how interesting narratives could come from the enhanced agency you'd feel *actually* being behind a character's eyes, about the way you could deconstruct games tropes by examining them in VR, discussing how you could play with perceived reality and altered perception with stylised graphics and optical illusions… but that question of immersion stumped us.

It was illuminating to see the very simple problems O'Luanaigh and his team at nDreams run into on a daily basis. Considering collision with walls and boundaries is a problem that was solved in gaming over a decade ago, but here it is again, represented and redefined for a whole new school of development. As we sat there, trying to think of a reply, O'Luanaigh continued.

"If your character's got glasses, how does that feel in VR? What about if you've got a tall character, a short character, how does it feel playing a female or a male? We've been looking into some really crazy things, some that we've found out were never meant to be »



● *Eve: Valkyrie* is currently the poster-child of the VR revolution, and with good reason – it's a ridiculous-looking experience.

● We've seen a lot of minimalist design in VR, but imagine when things begin to get *really* intricate and detailed.

Facebook's Oculus Rift

PROS

"The Oculus is so out there in terms of development that anyone can make anything on it. No matter who you are, you can buy a DK2 and mess around with it and play, and you can get plug-ins and all sorts that will help you out when you're messing with it, hacking things together and whatnot."

"It's also got the most choice; you'll see on the Oculus Share store, there are tons of games and apps and experiences that people are just messing around with. People are trying things out in Oculus, and they're not doing that to the same degree in any other headset. It's the playground for developers, that's its biggest advantage."

CONS

"The biggest challenge facing Oculus and [its other VR model] Crescent Bay is the lack of standardised controls – we develop with a 360 pad to use on the headset, but it would be really nice to see gesture controls added. I'm sure they'll have that, and positional tracking, added at some point in the not too distant future, though. That's the main and only weakness, really, though."

tested [laughs], and some that have been really fun. We're now working on a couple of launch titles for the major headsets – so we've got two titles for the Gear VR: *Gunner* and *Perfect Beach*. But then we've got much bigger titles in the works for the Oculus Rift and Project Morpheus and HTC Vive. The only one we've announced so far is *The Assembly* – a made-for-VR adventure game that's really mysterious, with a few characters you jump between, great dialogue and, hopefully, [sets the standard] for the kind of experience you can expect when VR formally launches."

The Assembly is still being kept under wraps (expect it to be revealed at E3, along with a slew of other VR exclusives), but O'Luanaigh's tease made us think… what *exactly* is going to define the VR industry for gamers? We'll certainly see a lot of experiences – the skydiving we mentioned at the start of this feature, *Perfect Beach*, or another terrifying experience we've seen where you're actually put in a coffin and a VR sim plays out burying you alive – but in terms of games… neither ourselves nor the developers know what's going to take off. O'Luanaigh explains.

"That's what's exciting for us – we're not copying existing games or saying 'We'll port X over to VR'. You can't just get rid of the cutscenes and change the GUI a bit in existing games – I mean, some [developers] will do that, for sure – but it's what you can do in VR that's different that excites me. We're learning that right now – the kind of things that just can't be done elsewhere, and that's exciting.

"Nobody knows what the biggest selling game in VR is going to be, nobody knows what the best mechanics are going to be… there's a lot of sharing between developers in VR, especially in the UK – we have a lot of meet-ups,

"There's a very non-corporate feeling to it all… We're just helping each other out"

● Sony released a demo for the Morpheus called *The Deep* – an experience that puts you in the shoes of a deep-sea diver. It's terrifying.



● nDreams' *Perfect Beach* is actually a genuinely relaxing experience; we were amazed by how removed a VR experience can be.

● As VR gets more powerful, we're expecting to see more photorealistic experiences come to life in a truly uncanny way.



talking about what works and what doesn't work. There's a very non-corporate feeling to it all, there are no PR secrets, no 'We're going to beat you!' mentality. We're just helping each other out, learning, seeing where it's going. There's such a huge, wide open territory here, you know? So many genres for people to tackle, so many games and things you can do."

And that's just in the gaming sphere – that's before you get into what else VR could be applied to. Facebook bought the Oculus Rift last year, and has remained fairly silent about its intentions since. It stands to reason, though, that Facebook wants to use VR to get people 'in' its system (you know, like in that *South Park* episode) and have you virtually hang out with your pals, bringing pictures and videos and stickers from your pockets and sharing them with your friends in a virtual bar or something.

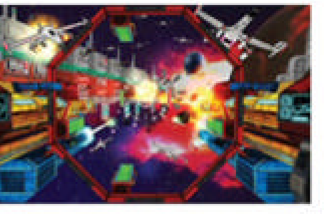
"And that's before you start thinking about education side of things!" exclaims O'Luanaigh. "Think of the kids in schools wandering around WWI trenches, in proper historical detail, thanks to bit of hardware. That's amazing to consider, right?"

It is. It really is. We're on the verge of a technological breakthrough – the biggest shake up the industry has seen since the introduction to 3D graphics. The only barrier we've got in the way of an actual progression (in terms of the games we can enjoy; *genuinely* new experiences) is the price point.

"I think headsets will be more expensive than everyone expects at launch," speculates O'Luanaigh, "I think everyone has this figure in their head of $200-$250, and I think that's optimistic. I think the headsets will come down to that, in the end, but I think we'll see around $500 for the headsets alone to start with. There's a lot of kit in there, a lot of stuff going on under the hood. I mean – don't quote me on that! – I don't know for sure, I just suspect they're going to be a lot more expensive than people seem to think they'll be."

We need to end this feature on that note, because otherwise we'll end up far too excited for tech that hasn't yet been fully pushed. But after playing around with VR for the past few months, visiting various studios and seeing them in action, trying different games out at trade shows, we're truly sold on the idea that developers and creative can do wholly new things in this domain. Yes, the headsets might be expensive when they launch, and no, we might not see the most diverse array of games available on launch, but with our support and a loyal hardcore propping up the middle of the VR industry, within a few years we'll see the headsets really begin to infiltrate the mainstream, invade the living room, kill the TV.

The only downside, for us, right now, is the price point. Otherwise, we can't see a single reason not to get excited by VR. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got to go skydiving again.





nDreams' *Borderlands*-like *Gunner* is an example of how well stylised graphics can work in a virtual reality context.



PROS

"I don't think it'll happen for a while, but there's no reason why you won't see ARVR – and that's proper AR, where you can actually see through the glass at the real world, where the tech understands the geography of what's in front of you. That's got great implications for gaming – imagine you're using the AR app for something else, just browsing or something, and a little notification comes up on the wall near you. 'Your Destiny game is ready' and then you select the notification and whoosh, VR Destiny comes onto your [HoloLens]. Imagine that!"

CONS

"The problem is that augmented reality headsets don't have a particularly wide field of view that's side to side or top to bottom, so everything becomes a postcard in the middle. Also, getting perfect dark in the pixels will be *really* hard if you're doing it over real world lighting… although [Microsoft] seems much better at that than I thought it would be already."



Saving Elder Scrolls Online



THE TRADITIONALLY SINGLE-PLAYER ELDER SCROLLS SERIES LAST YEAR MADE ITS MULTIPLAYER DEBUT, BUT DID SO QUIETLY. GAMES™ INVESTIGATES TO FIND OUT IF THE NEW-GEN VERSION HAS WHAT IT TAKES TO CHANGE ALL THAT...

MMOS ARE DYING. Despite the anomaly that is *World Of Warcraft*, there are few massively multiplayer online titles of recent years that had even a sliver of the success they were hoping for. *Star Wars: The Old Republic* quickly turned free-to-play; *The Secret World* rarely gets mentioned; *Neverwinter* was barely a blip; and even the commendable effort of *WildStar* has had to suffer the indignity of server merges so early in its life. All of them succeeded, in one form or another, to achieve their goals – yet all of them were deemed insignificant by the attitude of the general public. Now *The Elder Scrolls Online*, less than a year since its original PC release, switches from a subscription model to pay-to-play; a one-off fee to enter the world of Tamriel alongside the many masses. A stigma attaches itself to such a shift, however; so many still compare the potential popularity of the genre to the monthly revenue that *World Of Warcraft* pulls in, but is that really all that fair?

"*Elder Scrolls* games are well-known for their freedom," says Matt Firor, president of ZeniMax Online Studios and the game director of Elder Scrolls Online, "and we decided to change the game's revenue model to suit. This came about because of tons of player feedback. So we made lots of game changes based on that feedback, and then decided to extend that concept to payment as well. Players have the choice of subscribing or not, purchasing items in the Crown Store or not – but they all have to purchase the game in order to play." This new Crown Store coincided with the shift in subscription model, an in-game facility that allows for the purchasing of exclusive items and DLC. It's typical of many MMOs, admittedly, but Firor is certain it's the right thing to do for *The Elder Scrolls Online*. "I have not changed my mind at all. There is no one business model that "works". Games can, are, and will be very successful on subscription-only, subscription-optional, B2P, F2P and any other acronym you want to throw at it! Again, it depends on the situation."

He's right, of course; what might work for one game and its playerbase may not work for another. It's worth considering, too, that *TESO* is also heading to consoles soon – an audience that isn't quite as receptive to the idea of a subscription model as PC players generally are. "Many MMOs have made revenue model transitions and have been far better off for it," says Firor when considering the impact of the upcoming console launch and the game's subscription fee. "We listen to fan feedback, but only when it is constructive. As each game, each studio and each time-frame is completely different per game, there is no universal reason for changing revenue models." Let's not forget *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, the surprising phoenix-from-the-ashes that quite ably turned the original game's fortunes around. Having a fanbase as active on PS3 and PS4 as PC, *FFXIV:ARR* has proven that – when the »

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE IN NUMBERS

61 MILLION+ ITEMS IN THE GAME
1.2 MILLION ESTIMATED SUBSCRIBERS
10,000+ NPCs IN THE GAME
2,500 CROWNS FOR THE NIGHTMARE COURSER MOUNT – THE MOST EXPENSIVE ITEM
221 INDIVIDUAL LOCATIONS OR PLACES OF NOTE
213 QUESTLINES TO COMPLETE
144 DUNGEONS AND TRIALS
29 OF WHICH ARE GROUP DUNGEONS
50 CURRENT LEVEL CAP
10 RACES TO PICK FROM
7 YEARS IN DEVELOPMENT
6 MAJOR CONTENT UPDATES SO FAR



SEEKING OBLIVION

The Elder Scrolls Online already enables PvP set inside Oblivion's Cyrodiil area. The Imperial City itself, however, is locked off – at least for now. ZeniMax Online Studios has already talked a little of its upcoming area: we know it'll be a PvP zone with PvE bosses, while players will vie for control over different districts for their chosen faction. Fans will look forward to exploring the assaulted Imperial City, it being a significant location in Oblivion – but thanks to data-mined images we can tie up a few ideas of where and what you'll be fighting.



MARKET

This zone can be captured and controlled by your own faction, and once done you'll unlock specific tradeskill stations that will allow you to craft the unique Daedric Imperial Armour.

ARENA

With the Dremora having taken over the zone, players will have to fight to stop the gladiatorial battles they're forcing their Imperial hostages into.

ARBORETUM

This iconic district is one of the few places that hasn't been completely consumed by the Cold Harbour, with flora still present in the area. Your goal is to ensure that life remains.



SEWER ENTRANCES

In homage to *Oblivion*, your entry into the Imperial City will actually be through the same sewers you previously exited. There are three, one for each faction, leading to safe zones inside the city itself.

TEMPLE DISTRICT

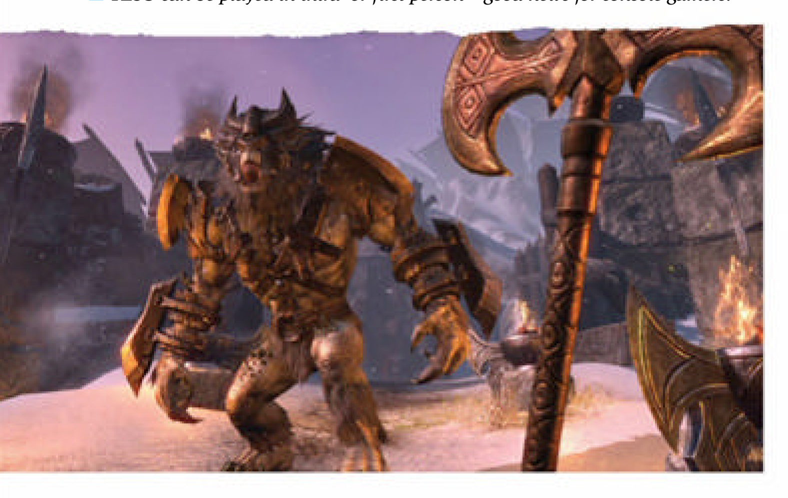
Another PvE zone that will have you attempting to stop them from sacrificing people to help kickstart the Planemeld once more – its a set of circumstances you'll become all too familiar with.

game offers something players want – it doesn't always matter about the choice of subscription model. In fact, the steady stream of content both free and paid has both kept existing players interested and drawn many more in; the recent inclusion of the Golden Saucer and the Triple Triad card game, in particular, helped surge the number of subscribers.

That's ultimately the most significant point for any MMO; content is the vicious cycle any online-only title falls victim to. Maintaining a steady playerbase needs new content, fail to achieve that quickly enough and the numbers will inevitably dwindle. *The Elder Scrolls Online*, with it still in its first year, has obviously not been lax in this department. Whether it's updates to improve early concerns or new areas and quests for players to explore, the upkeep of *TESO* has been stellar. More than that, however, it's been driven by the very players involved in the game. "Almost 100% of the game systems and content we've put into the game since launch was in response to player feedback," claims Firor. "In fact, we liked some of the ideas so much, we definitely made sure that they made it into the game before console launch, so all *TESO* players could experience it – for instance the Justice System and Champion System, and our combat animation and "feel" overhaul, especially."

> I HAVE NOT CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT LAUNCHING WITH A SUBSCRIPTION. THERE IS NO ONE BUSINESS MODEL THAT "WORKS"

TESO *can be played in third- or first-person – good news for console gamers.*



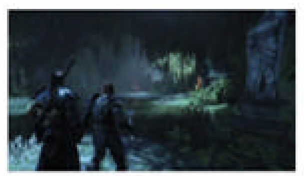
The Champion System is a reworking of the post-level 50 endgame, a system of server-wide points that can be used to spend on passive bonuses not unlike *Skyrim*'s unlockable constellation system. You'll only earn these after reaching maximum level, but the points are shared across all your characters on the server – meaning even your pre-50 classes can benefit. It's a neat way of rewarding continued play after the level cap has been reached, for certain. The Justice System is a little more intriguing, enabling the pickpocketing, item theft and even murder of NPCs – a staple of the RPG series. Currently it's PvE-only, ranking your nefarious deeds, affecting the bounty placed on your head and the aggression of the NPC guards that patrol the world. It's an important addition to the game, and understandably one that ZeniMax Studios would like to see included in the game's console release. In the future this Justice System will enable PvP, too, allowing for players to become an Enforcer, tracking down other criminal players and claiming that

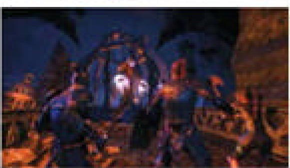


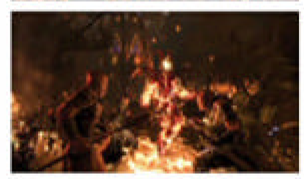
bounty. This same considered approach will continue to be placed on future content, too, with Firor promising "a mix of adding features where appropriate and fleshing out the map of Tamriel with new areas to explore". It's important that mix is handled well, though, since new content is always going to be significant not only for keeping the players involved but in drawing in newcomers too. "I think the community continually fluctuates in games of this type," says Firor, "it's to be expected. For those players who haven't played in a while, the new content is being received so well by the existing community that they're interested to see what's going on."

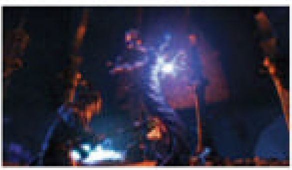
IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO overlook the change in platforms for *The Elder Scrolls Online*, however. The move from PC to consoles is an opportunity very few games of this ilk are afforded, often courtesy of their complicated systems, menus and numerous key presses. Considering the recent heritage – and unequivocal success – that the *Elder Scrolls* series has maintained on consoles, it's perhaps no surprise that its MMO equivalent will have no problems making the transition to controller with minimal complaints – at least in a mechanical sense. How has ZeniMax Studios been approaching the move to consoles? Firor claims – above all else – it was important to ensure it remains the same game, platform parity from PC to console with the only difference being the means of input. "Developers approach situations like this in a couple of different ways," he says. "Our going-in position for console was to make sure that the game on the console is exactly the same as the game on PC. No changes. From that point, we then identified the things that *had* to change based on the controller/TV experience and went from there. What has resulted is a version of *TESO* that has exactly the same content and gameplay as PC – with all the updates and new content added since the PC launch – but has a completely rebuilt user interface; we had to do this to fully support controller gameplay. We also had to add a voice chat system to replace the old text entry interface used by PC players."

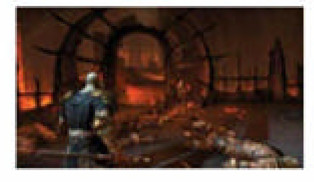
The sad truth is that *TESO* did launch on PC to an air of negativity. Its critical reception praised the developer's ability to bring the *Elder Scrolls* format into the MMO space, but it was replete with faults that ruined the experience for many. Bugs and an awkward phasing system, in particular, led to many becoming disillusioned with the vanilla release of the game. Now, with *TESO* heading over to console complete with fixes from the PC version, ZeniMax Studios has a rare second chance at a first impression – but does the studio see it that way? "I see it more of a 'making the game available to the rest of the gamers who want to play it' situation," says Firor. "Much of the *Elder Scrolls*' vast success has come on consoles, so it's to be expected that many gamers will wait to play it on the platform of their choice. And yes, we »











ZeniMax Online Studios has put in a lot of effort tweaking and improving the game over the year, even going so far as to fix the 'feel' of combat and animations.



The approach to content has smartly been attuned to the things that the community have expressed interest in.

Modern Multiplayer

The five faces of new wave MMOs

Destiny

While there's nothing exactly 'massive' about Destiny, it still maintains many of the facets of the MMO, like regular content drops, an endgame that revolves around the repeated completion of 'dungeons', and raids for better gear.

DayZ

The zombie survival experience harnesses its collective group of server-wide players in a very different fashion. Here it enables emergent gameplay through a player's own narrative rather than a scripted one, helped along by the unpredictability of other players.

Elite: Dangerous

The players themselves affect the narrative of *Elite: Dangerous*, emboldened by the regular newsletters Frontier sends out detailing changes in its digitised universe. Giving the community control is becoming the new hot MMO thing.

PlanetSide 2

More akin to a large multiplayer match rather than more typically MMO ideals, *PlanetSide 2* manages to hand control over to the players all the same. The command structure, direction of a force and its individuals are all driven by the players

The Tomorrow Children

The idea of persistence is a key part of a number of upcoming games. The idea of being 'always connected' is less about your interactions with other players but instead how your actions affect the world for you and every other player.

have worked very hard over the last year to fix problems in response to feedback and criticism – we've been very open about this – and to get that work done before console launch so we can provide the best gaming experience from the beginning on those platforms." Now, with those early issues ironed out, *TESO* can make the strongest impact possible for console gamers – a bunch who, despite the option to port PC characters over to PS4 or Xbox One, may not have had any experience with the MMO at all. It is a fresh start for the game.

"As it has been out for almost a year at this point, I think gamers will know what to expect," says Firor, disagreeing that console gamers could be unaware of what to expect from *TESO*. "There are thousands of Twitch and YouTube videos to watch showing gameplay of all types in *TESO*. It should not come as a shock that you will see other players in Tamriel when you adventure in *TESO*." That is true, but *The Elder Scrolls Online* does handle the way it tells its story and quests in a subtly different manner to the series – could there be a worry that gamers who have traditionally played the series on console might not be prepared? "We'll make sure that everyone hears about our DLC through community outreach and marketing," Firor says, unconcerned. "Obviously players who are in-game will see players with new armour and mounts and will ask them where they got them and will learn about DLC and store items organically that way."



Console gamers can finally explore Tamriel with friends, with large-scale PvP in Cyrodiil for those that prefer hunting them.

We definitely made sure that the updates and changes made it into the game before console launch

IN SPEAKING WITH Firor, it's clear that the console release isn't concerning for the team. It is important, undoubtedly, but ZeniMax Studios has – at the very least – considered its approach well, even in light of the current market. The problem, however, is understanding that market. When the likes of *Destiny* refuses to acknowledge the term 'MMO', where *Elite: Dangerous* offers the same ever-changing, always-online dynamic of *EVE Online* without the social taboo that comes with the phrase or how persistently connected games such as *DayZ* and *H1Z1* create completely new attitudes towards online worlds – how can *TESO* survive when it is still being apparently tainted by the acronym 'MMO'? "I don't even use the term "MMO" to refer to *TESO*," admits Firor, "I call it an "Online RPG", as the term MMO now applies to so many different types of games, many of which have very little in common except for connected gameplay." There was a time where an MMO needed to include a specific type of gameplay if it was to succeed. Now, as a history of oversaturation tells us, it's all any developer can do to step away from these typical conventions. The question, then, isn't what does that mean for *The Elder Scrolls Online*, but instead what does it mean for MMOs? "I think we need some better terminology," says Firor, "because when you look at *Destiny*, *Minecraft* and *TESO*, all are online, all are connected – and all are completely different."

When the concept of persistent connectedness all link the likes of *Destiny*, *Elite: Dangerous* and *TESO* – all completely different in styles of gameplay – the difference between the three doesn't seem quite so apparent. What does it mean to be 'always-online' when so many games handle it so differently? "That's something we've all been thinking a lot about," poses Firor. "Connected gameplay has become so mainstream these days on so many different types of devices that it is changing online gaming rapidly. Years ago, MMOs were the original social networks – you logged into the games just as much to chat with friends as you did to play them – this is in the days long before Facebook or Twitter."

With our ever-connected lives it's hard to deny Firor's logic; gaming isn't so much about opportunities to socialise anymore – just look at the distinct lack of local multiplayer as a key example – as it is about simply connecting with like-minded people in a format you all enjoy. "Now that all your social connections are reachable from your phone," adds Firor, "gamers are concentrating less on socialising and more on playing, and games are changing because of it – more fast-paced, less downtime, rewards on a far faster cadence. Compare *Destiny* to original *EverQuest* – where it could take upwards of 30 minutes to recharge your spellcasting ability to full – and you'll see what I mean. Even comparing *WOW* circa 2005 to *WOW* circa 2015 and you'll see vast changes in the game to react to changing player expectations and demands." So the once iconic MMO *is* dying, then, but in its place we're given a whole world of opportunities. Whether it's the smaller form of evolving stories found in *Destiny*, or the grander connected universe of *Elite: Dangerous*, the word 'MMO' just isn't useful any more. The evolving nature of *The Elder Scrolls Online* only helps to punctuate that point, the archetypal modern online RPG that proves evolving and improving is every bit as important as creating new content. With the game's console launch on the horizon we're left not concerned for an ailing genre, but instead excited for the future of Tamriel.







Images: Courtesy of Gfinity

Pro gaming events are spreading around the world and garnering increasing interest with many new organisations, like gfinity here, taking a lead.



eSports Are Changing Game Design

With their popularity growing each year, we discuss and discover how eSports are influencing the wider world of game design

Not all that long ago, 'eSports' conjured up visions of otherwise derelict basements and LAN-cafes playing host to small numbers of dedicated clans vying for personal satisfaction and micro-scale fame. These were the early proving grounds across which the likes of *Counter-Strike*, *Team Fortress* and any number of RTS title would thrive. Such dens, with an almost prohibition-grade aura of suspicion and mystery to the outsider, were the haven of the hallowed few – the originators of a dedication to digital competition that is influencing, with greater regularity each year, the economics and culture of gaming as a whole.

Over the past decade, that humble ripple from a darkened room has churned itself into a tidal wave that demands entire stadiums to satisfy its attendees, exhaustingly modern celebrities for fans to ogle over and the formation of entire sub-cultures to better serve the dynamic and interests of a new breed of player and spectator. It's a world that you'll have undoubtedly heard about, but unless you're already a part of it, you're »

■ *Dota 2* is one of the primary examples of success within the eSports arena, its annual 'The International' tournament featuring a prize pool of millions of dollars.

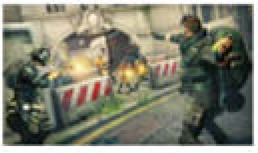
» unlikely to understand the fervour that surrounds it and the dedication it breeds.

In all likelihood, you've read reports on the number of spectators and the amount of prize money awarded to the winners of the biggest competitions. Last year a prize pool of a staggering $10,923,980 featured in *Dota 2*'s 'The International', a two-week event compromising of 'playoffs' and 'main event' components. Entire broadcasting streams were set up specifically to cater for the millions watching around the round, with different commentary options depending on your knowledge of the game and its top-level players. Yes: if you knew nothing about *Dota 2* there was a commentary team setup specifically to serve you.

League Of Legends is equally significant, its fanbase arguably the most passionate and dedicated of all with entire squads of professional cosplayers acting as the cheerleaders for the most famous and well-supported teams. For last year's world championships, over 100 hours of official content was broadcast live to an audience hungry to consume action and news. Peak viewing figures for the final hit 11.2 million unique spectators, each of those averaging 67 minutes of viewing time.

If nothing else, these numbers and those supporters highlight that this isn't the simple offshoot of the wider videogame framework that many like to categorise it as – this is an entire industry in and of itself, featuring its own economy and sense of purpose. It's a formation that could easily withstand the effects of oft-quoted fears surrounding the 'death of consoles' or 'gamergate'.





■ *Dirty Bomb*, an upcoming F2P shooter from Splash Damage, has dreams of becoming an eSports title but its developers claim that only the audience holds the power to make that a reality.

> "[IT'S] A MINDSET THAT EVEN THE CONTENT CREATORS THEMSELVES HAVE YET TO CATCH UP WITH AND UNDERSTAND"

While the quality and nature of the games themselves generate the initial interest, it's the foresight of the developers behind them – in this instance Valve (*Dota 2*) and Riot Games (*League Of Legends*) – to promote and serve a spectator crowd that has allowed them to grow into the behemoths they are today. To create celebrity and fandom, you must properly nurture it within an arena that perfectly meets its needs and wants. That, perhaps more than anything else, is what these studios have done and continue to focus on.

They're not, however, the only ones trying to do it. Late to the party they might be, but developers of more traditional experiences are keen to cater to both the eSports-style player and the potentially lucrative market of spectators. Understandably excited by the reach eSports has garnered for itself in a relatively short space of time and the success it has had in carving out social communities within a landscape that, rightly or wrongly, is typically associated with loners, we're now at a phase where a significant chunk of game design is aimed at courting this crowd.

Both Sony and Microsoft included twitch.tv streaming and video uploading capabilities within the framework of the PS4 and Xbox One in order to tap into the spectator culture that eSports had long since validated. Likewise, even the most mainstream of console-focused shooters, like *Halo 5*, consult with professional gamers to get their take on weapon balancing and map design with a view to appealing to the most dedicated audience sectors. While you might not consider



League of Legends in Numbers

A guide to the viewing figures for the 2014 world championships...

The 2014 final for *League Of Legends*' 'Worlds' tournament took place in the Sangam Stadium in Seoul, Korea; some 40,000 people packing out what was the primary venue for the country's FIFA World Cup hosting duties in 2002. Sangam's party was only the tip of the viewing figures and required organisation, though. Over 100 hours of content was shown live around the world in 19 different commentary languages via 40 broadcasters. 288 million cumulative daily unique impressions were recorded over the tournament's duration, calculated by adding up the number of unique viewers that tuned in each day. That led to over 179 million hours of *League Of Legends* content consumed across the 15-day event. Unique viewer count topped the 27 million person mark, with 11.2 million watching the grand final between Royal Club and Samsung White – that alone represents a near 30% raise from the 8.7 million that watched the 2013 final. The Worlds 2015 will be held in Europe, although no specifics have been revealed regarding dates and locations. As with 2014, which was hosted across Singapore, Taipei and Korea, the 2015 tournament will take place in multiple cities and features an initial group knockout phase followed by quarterfinals, semifinals and final.

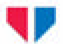
yourself a part of it, or even lay claim to any interest of it, you can feel safe betting on the fact that you've played games that have been influenced significantly by the increasing popularity of the eSports movement.

As with most advancements in entertainment and culture, then, it's the mainstream itself that is now trying to play catch-up. Despite the mainstream having spawned it as a sub culture, eSports has become something bigger, something hard to pin down and control. One of the best examples of this can be seen in the most recent Visceral Games release, *Battlefield Hardline*. Here is a venerable FPS series that regularly found itself on the playlist of those early competitive gaming adopters, *Battlefield*'s original incarnations providing a scale and diversity that the majority of its peers could only dream about.

Customarily, *Battlefield* has always been about that sense of scale. Huge numbers of players playing simultaneously across maps easily big enough to handle them. While this can be an exhilarating experience for the competitors, the size of the arenas makes the idea of spectating as confusing as it is underwhelming. At best only a tiny portion of the map would be visible to an onlooker, unless the viewpoint was pulled back so far that the result was akin to watching terminally depleted ant colonies do battle.

Enter, then, *Hardline*'s five versus five multiplayer options. Set across small sections of the game's larger maps, these player-limited game modes are designed specifically with eSports in mind. More rigidly-defined maps make it easier to view the action and allow you to make sure you've got a consistent angle on any firefights.

"eSports is something that has really been taking off over the last few years and it's something that a lot of people on the [*Battlefield Hardline*] team are very passionate about," explains Visceral Games' vice president Steve Papoutsis. "We also expanded our spectator capacity. Now, rather than take away one of the participant slots, we've allowed up to four people to spectate a match. We're really hoping the streaming and eSports community enjoy those modes and pick them up."

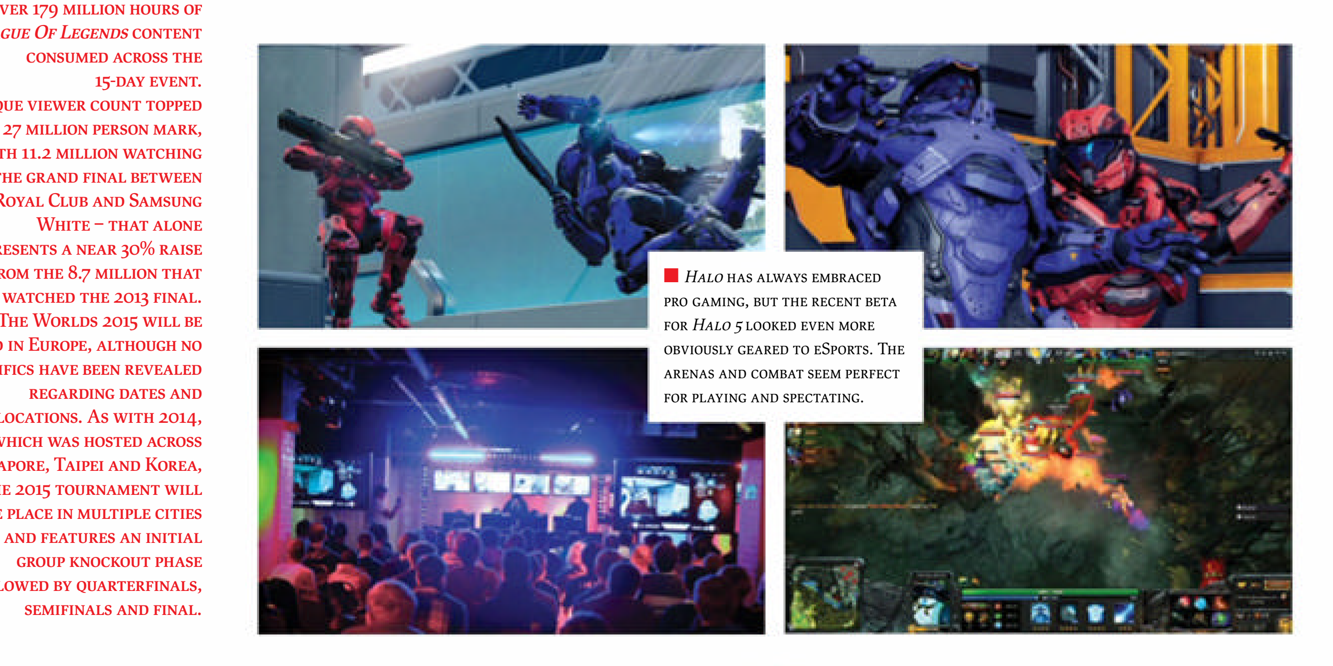


Hoping that such ideas are picked up and shared is one thing, but it can't be achieved without the kind of game design blend that will attract the sorts of players that are worth watching. In addition to the constricted playing space, a number of *Hardline*'s five versus five game modes have been built from the ground up with the high-level competitive style of play that viewers want to watch in mind. It's a move away from *Battlefield*'s original selling point of lengthy battles that take place over expansive areas and towards something much closer to *Counter-Strike*, a game that has for many years shown incredible consistency when it comes to courting a legion of eager spectators.

"[*Hardline*'s] five versus five, permadeath modes are something that really appeals to a specific part of the community and we were really interested in supporting that," continues Papoutsis. "We created the Crosshair and Rescue [game modes] to do that. We've been working with a group called The Game Changers, which is comprised of some of the best *Battlefield* players in the world and some of the community's most active YouTubers, throughout the development of *Hardline*. We brought them in, showed them early builds, asked for their feedback and tried to incorporate as much of that as possible where it makes sense."

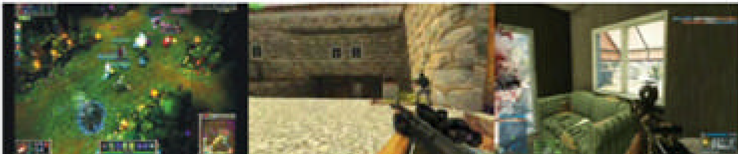
Shooters have a long history of involvement in the competitive gaming scene as both a vehicle for elite competition and as a content type that's easy to package for spectators. It's not by any means, however, the only »

> "There's hardly a weekend that goes by where there isn't some large Hearthstone tournament going on"

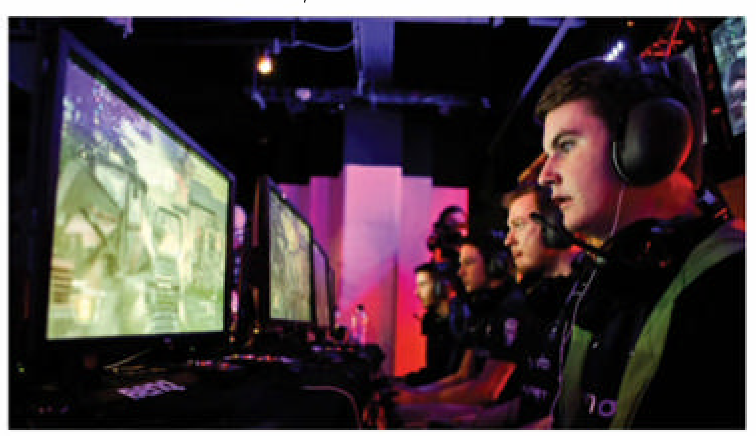


Halo has always embraced pro gaming, but the recent beta for *Halo 5* looked even more obviously geared to eSports. The arenas and combat seem perfect for playing and spectating.





Developer Riot Games reports that 67 million people every day are playing *League Of Legends*.



Get rich gaming?

There are people that have gotten rich, very rich, from playing games...

Dedicate your life to your hobbies and passions and, if you're lucky enough, you'll be able to make a living from it. That's the standard line delivered to everyone from school kids to potentially reformed criminals. Can you, though, make a living from gaming? Well, yes, you can – but you need to be very, very good. Five players have toppled the $1 million mark through their skill with a mouse and keyboard, with a further seven making $500,000 or more – and that's not including the various endorsement deals many of them enjoy with technology-related companies. Five nationalities make up the top ten earners, with five Chinese players heading the list above those from Estonia, USA, Ukraine and Korea.

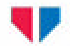
Name	Earnings ($)*
Wang 'Banana' Jiao	1,192,049
Zhi 'Hao' Chen	1,191,774
Zhao 'SanSheng' Wang	1,186,074
Pan 'Mu' Zhang	1,174,610
Ning 'Xiao8' Zhang	1,145,503
Clement 'Puppey' Ivanov	667,332
Danil 'Dendi' Ishutin	606,839
Oleksandr 'XBOCT' Dashkevych	603,893
Saahil 'UNiVeRsE' Arora	581,826
Jae-Dong 'Jaedong' Lee	578,340

*Figures taken from: http://www.esportsearnings.com/players

genre to be influenced by the rise of eSports. While there are a number of high-profile fighting game tournaments each year, particularly those featuring Street Fighter professionals, beat 'em ups are, in general, a less popular proposition in this arena. That doesn't stop new entries from falling under eSports' umbrella of influence, however.

Mortal Kombat has, for the most part, been less concerned with precision than its genre bedfellows; concentrating more on visual impact and outlandish happenings than supporting an environment of steadfast fair play of the type required for professional competition. *Mortal Kombat X*, though, seems to have moved further than its ancestors to embrace this kind of equality.

"eSports has definitely become a lot bigger and it continues to get bigger every year. We had that in mind going into [*Mortal Kombat X*]," Han Lowe, senior producer on *Mortal Kombat X*, tells us. "Obviously, we want to make the game accessible to the casual players, but we definitely want things in there for the professional players that really want to dig in deep."



One of the ways Lowe set about doing this was to, in a similar way to *Battlefield Hardline*, bring in players of a professional standard during development to garner their opinions on character design and balancing. This resulted in telling instances in which such players would, in Lowe's words, "do things that we just didn't think about". Clearly, this highlights a new mindset with which certain players approach these games – a mindset that even the content creators themselves have yet to catch up with and understand.

"We like to think that we cover all of the bases," Lowe explains, "but in reality different things are going to be discovered by different people." That sense of discovery is an intended theme in the finished product, too, with more effort spent on providing the kind of options that top-level players require in order to dedicate themselves to a single game over the long-term. "We want to give you everything we can to help you be as prepared as possible and allow you to, in some sense, customise your gameplay and really go at it and have success," says Lowe. In turn, the facilitating of elite play leads to the creation of an audience that wants to watch it.

The changing face of competitive gaming has caught other games and individuals slightly off guard, though, with some surprising cases. You would think that Blizzard, off the back of the success of *StarCraft*, would be fully tooled up and knowledgeable about what is and isn't going to work in the eSports realm. That's not necessarily the case...

"When we first started working on *Hearthstone* we thought 'Oh yeah, this could totally be an eSport'. Then, after all the excitement and tournaments that happened last year, we then knew it was going to be a really big deal – much bigger than we'd thought." Those are the words of Eric Dodds, *Hearthstone*'s game director and someone that has been involved in the project from the start.

Hearthstone has created celebrities of many of its top players, from those that specialise in tournament play to those with Twitch channels that have become invaluable sources of edutainment for a legion of followers. It's something Dodds is still coming to terms with. "The eSports thing is already in full swing [for *Hearthstone*]. Last year I was blown away by the number of people



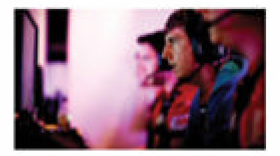
"GAMES ARE BECOMING A SEMI-PASSIVE BROADCASTING MEDIUM IN A SIMILAR VEIN TO TELEVISION AND MOVIES"

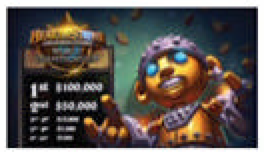
who are engaged in that side of things, the number of tournaments that happen and the number of people that watched our world championships at Blizzcon. This year there are even more tournaments going on. I think there's hardly a weekend that goes by where there isn't some large *Hearthstone* tournament going on. It's certainly something that we feel passionate about and is important and the community has told us that. So, yeah, eSports is super-important and it's growing like crazy with *Hearthstone*."



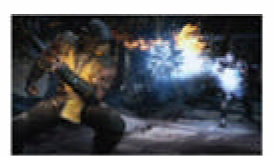
Hearthstone is, like *Dota 2* and *League of Legends*, one of the few examples of a game that is as revered as a broadcast as it is as a game. Certainly, there are people that spend more time watching others playing the game than they do actually playing themselves – leading to a new environment in which games are becoming a semi-passive broadcasting medium in a similar vein to television and movies. The difference, though, is that it's people power that decides which games are worthy of such status. Unlike the near-guarantee that a primetime slot on the right channel will see your TV show hit reasonable ratings, the nature of internet consumption means only the most interesting entities will raise themselves above what is essentially a level playing field.

It's a fact that's not lost on Rich Jolly, co-founder of dedicated shooter studio Splash Damage and a man sweating about the upcoming launch of the free-to-play *Dirty Bomb*. "It would be great if *Dirty Bomb* did become part of that world, but we're not going to come out and champion ourselves as the next big eSports game. That kind of thing is decided by the players, not us. The big mantra with any game is that once it's out there it's not your game it's the community's game. I think some developers are too arrogant when they try and hold on to everything. We have to listen and react to what players are telling us."





Blizzard is offering the winner of its upcoming 2015 Hearthstone World Championship $100,000 in prize money. It will be the second time the competition has been run.



Professional level players were brought in to assist developer Netherrealm in the creation of *Mortal Kombat X*, a practise that is becoming increasingly common across many games.

Jolly describes Splash Damage as a company that came to life out of a community that "used to play games in competing clans against each other" and, such as, "that competitive nature has propagated every game that we've done." He is, therefore, someone with a keen understanding – from both player and developer perspective – of what is required from a game to have it appeal to this new competitive crowd.

His point regarding the power of crowds highlights that the eSports community is one that is very much self-regulated. You can push towards, market to and appease the audience, but ultimately it's not the developers that have the final say about what is and isn't a good game for eSports. At best you can add the depth and the spectator functions, you can consult with professional gamers and the most popular broadcasters, but even the best laid plans can be undone by an audience that meets your efforts with indifference.

This is leading to increased efforts from developers in understanding players and what appeals to them, which can only be a good thing in an industry in which for so long the design and creation process was a source of mystery to the uninitiated. That sense of enhanced inclusion is galvanising a medium that has previously struggled with a sense of identity against other, more entrenched and aged, forms of entertainment and social interaction. In this area it's eSports that has much to teach the world of 'traditional' game design. Genuinely, the offspring has become the mentor.



THE NEW REPUBLIC OF LIONHEAD

"Even the sceptical people are won over by our execution and just how much fun they are having," insists Lionhead's product manager and monetisation director Ian Griffiths as we sit down with the team behind *Fable Legends* and discuss the recently announced decision to release as free-to-play and across Xbox One and PC with cross-play. It's part of a series of bold moves the Guildford developer has made as it looks to set down a marker for a new era for the studio. And there's no shortage of scepticism around *Fable Legends* for a raft of reasons.

First, it's not an RPG. Second, it's a multiplayer game not entirely unlike a MOBA. Third, it's an asymmetric multiplayer game (very much in vogue at the moment). Fourth, it's also releasing as a free-to-play game. Just about every hurdle you could throw in front of this game is there and Lionhead has chosen this route. "Of course fans still want us to someday make a single-player game – and maybe we will some day – but that's part of the »



WHAT THE MAKER OF FABLE LEGENDS MAY HAVE LOST IN A TALISMANIC LEADER, IT HAS GAINED WITH A RENEWED SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE. GAMES™ FINDS OUT WHY THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM IS PUTTING FABLE ON THE LINE WITH A NEW GENRE, OUTLOOK AND RELEASE MODEL

» concern," admits David Eckelberry, game director. "The other part is, free-to-play can be great, but it can also be done quite poorly, in a way that is player-unfriendly, if you will. Done by a company that is more of an app-game company than a game company, that it's just doing this more for financial reasons. Obviously I don't think that's the case with us, with everything we've said, with our commitments and everything else I think ultimately we can offer a very fair and very cool proposition to our players and invite them into a new way to play this game."

It's good to know that Lionhead understands the battle it has on its hands and the reality of how we feel as gamers about such issues. *Legends* has the potential to not only alienate *Fable* fans, but put off everyone else too, and yet as Griffiths pointed out at the beginning, when you play *Fable Legends* all of that appears to fall away. "We're running a closed beta right now in which we are really talking with the players and we really do take forward a lot of their suggestions," he adds. "Recently I was at GDC and I had lots of people who weren't sure on the title,

"We are gamers; we've seen some of the not so well implemented versions of free to play"

Ian Griffiths, product manager

and I was just like 'Just play the game.' And when people play it, they just love it."

Speaking from first-hand experience, it's hard to disagree. While there are risks to releasing a *Fable* game in this fashion, it's still a lot of fun. The team combat feels balanced, the villain gameplay that's similar to playing as a sadistic dungeon master works well and the setting feels familiar and comfortable, as Albion should. But what's refreshing is that this feels like a game made by a team with its shackles off, ready to take on a new challenge and push boundaries regardless of where that might lead them, including free-to-play.

"When we started designing the game, we knew we were doing something pretty different with this *Fable* title compared to previous ones," says Eckelberry. "We knew it was a possibility. We started thinking about how we would do it if we went in that direction, and eventually when the opportunity came to align with Windows 10 and reach a much wider audience then it really started to make sense for us and we committed to the ideal."

The most important question then once Lionhead had committed to this direction was how fair is it going to be? The key reason why we bristle when we hear the term free-to-play is because we know there's no such thing as really free. There's a catch somewhere along the way and the worst examples are really pay to win. Lionhead seems to appreciate our concern. "Our commitments are being open, fair and generous," Emmi Kuusikko, business and strategy director for Lionhead, tells us. "So 'open' meaning there will be no gated areas. You'll have access to all the areas of the game for free. 'Fair' meaning everything that affects gameplay is earn-able so there is no way to buy a winning power, as that would unbalance the game you are playing in. And then 'generous'; we want to value the player's time and make sure that it doesn't take an unreasonable amount of time to obtain the items and things that are earnable in the game – whether it be Heroes or something similar."



Evienne is one of the newer heroes to be revealed and sports a rather mean-looking broad sword as her means of attack. Balancing your team for melee and range combat is very important.

"We are gamers; we've seen some of the not so well implemented versions of free to play," adds Griffiths. "It was very important to us – we sat down for many months, we went through many different passes of 'what can we do that makes this reasonable? That makes this good for us and good for the player?'"

And it's not as if *Fable Legends* would be the first game to have gotten it right. As much as free-to-play can be seen as a dirty phrase in the industry right now, we also have to acknowledge that some of the most popular titles around right now are free. Whether it's *League Of Legends*, *Dota 2*, *World Of Tanks* or *Hearthstone*, free games are attracting audiences and doing things in the right way. "For me, *Dota 2* has had a big impact," Griffiths revealed, explaining he's a big fan of the game. "I've played like 800 hours in the last 18 months. Valve do it in a really nice way, and that's the kind of position we want to be in. Where our players really like what we do and it's fair, and everybody does well."

The key to this will be rotating rosters of content, similar to the approach taken with the *Killer Instinct* reboot that launched with the Xbox One. But unlike the two characters and single stage of that fighter, *Fable Legends* will likely have at least four heroes to select from, the villain to play as and variations in setting as you progress. In other words it will be limited, but there will still be plenty to explore. Then, after a

couple of weeks, everything will switch around and you'll get to try out something else.

"This all comes back to our attitude to F2P," explains Griffiths. "We're not out there for any cynical reason. We're making the game as open to as many people as possible. We wanted to do free to play the right way."

We asked Eckelberry to break it all down for us. "All the quests are going to be free, period, end of story," he clarifies. "You can download and play all of those quests and the only restriction is a narrative, logical one. If you wanted to play Season One, quest seven, well you first need to play quest six. There are some exceptions with branching, but for simplicity's sake, the first time you play through the quest, you play through it in an order. And you can start Season Two after that, etc. The only real exception to that is that you'll always be able to play with your friends.

"So, if you've been playing for a while and sign up for the first time, I can join your quest even though it may leap me ahead in continuity. The story won't make perfect sense but that's like starting a TV show half way through."

And its good to know that while *Legends* may be moving *Fable* away from some of its established ideas, it won't be losing its identity completely. While custom heroes will not be an option, the variety (nine revealed so far with at least three more on the horizon) looks strong and you will be able to add some vanity items, not unlike in a MOBA. »

Why is DirectX 12 exciting?

Fable Legends could be the first to use it for Xbox One, but why does that matter?

DirectX 12 is launching with Windows 10 and it's getting a lot of gamers very excited, but unless you keep up with game programming news we'll forgive you for not knowing what it's all about. DirectX is a collection of application programming interfaces (API) for handling multimedia development. Essentially, it's a tool for making games and this 10th iteration promises to gives developers much greater access to the raw power of PCs and the Xbox One. What does that mean for you? Well, on PCs we could be looking at much smoother frame-rates and more detail on the screen. On Xbox One, Microsoft has played down the possibility it will help with frame-rates, but it should make development easier by using less of the CPU or GPU of the console and by extension it should allow game-makers more room to stretch and test the hardware in new ways to get a little more from it.



"We want to offer a huge spectrum of different characters that offer you those sorts of choices to start with," says Eckelberry. "If you want to play a cunning rogue or a brave heroine, all of those options will be immediately apparent for a casual fan just by looking at the characters. After that, we still want to make it like previous *Fable* games. Where the magical barbers in town can do things like change your skin tone, change your hair or eye colour, maybe put on different masks for a character like Breach. Visual customisation is definitely there. And then there's gameplay customisation. Heroes level, they acquire loot, they can buy different weapons and armour and outfits. That's stuff we are already building into our demo build now."

So, many of the trappings and most of the personality of what has always made Albion such a rich and welcoming world to explore will remain, even if some of the structures are a little different. But this remains a big experiment for Lionhead, putting so much weight and effort behind a 'spin-off' *Fable* title. What's more, even if the game proves to be popular, there's no guarantee it will make any money. We were surprised to find that the team seems pretty comfortable with that possibility.

"We know that in most free to play universes 80 to 90 per cent of users are playing for free," admits Eckelberry. "We very much know that, and we don't expect or want to break that rule and start forcing players to spend in some way, right? The advantage of us being part of Microsoft is that we will be there on Windows, we will be there on Xbox, we will get some good advertising – because we're a first-party platform that way – and so we expect to be able to get several million players through that.

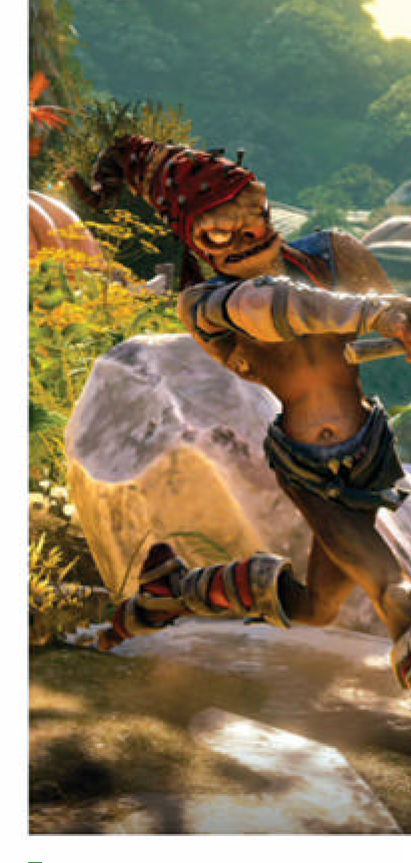
"What those exact numbers are, it really doesn't matter. Microsoft is in this to create a great community and to make gaming on Xbox One, and on PC, and on cross-platform be amazing. Because it really shows third-party developers and to other first-party developers that this is a great thing to do. Microsoft isn't out for us to break the bank with untold riches."

And we could sense that unpressured atmosphere from the Lionhead team. It knows that it has a tough challenge ahead getting over the scepticism and doubt around this multiplayer game, but it's not feeling anything other than a drive to make something they can be proud of from behind them. After *Killer Instinct* attempted a similar model, *Fable Legends* is building on the idea. But is this something that Microsoft could be looking to spread even further? Will it be long before we see a free-to-play *Halo* game on Xbox One (not including the Russian-only *Halo Online*)?

> "Microsoft started to support us more as it looked like we would be one of the first DX12 games"
>
> David Eckelberry, game director

"It made sense for us to do *Fable Legends* free to play, but I'm not going to presume to judge other studios or how other games should be," is Eckelberry's analysis. "We think this is one model that can work, and if other studios can take some inspiration from it, wonderful. But we really built this to be appropriate for our game."

But importantly, the technology and the infrastructure is there to support this model according to Griffiths. "A lot of the Microsoft platform changes – with Xbox One and Windows 10 – have allowed us to deliver this game in a better way than we would have been able to in previous generations. There's a lot more we can do, services-wise, as well as tech obviously with the power, which has been really useful for us. As David said, we're not trying to tell other people that they definitely should go F2P, but we are showing it's a viable option on the platform."



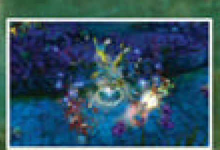
Playing as the dungeon master of *Fable Legends* promises to be a tricky challenge as you spawn and command monsters in real time.

The good and bad of F2P

Who are the heroes and villains of the controversial model?

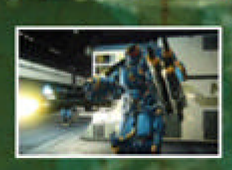
The Good

League of Legends



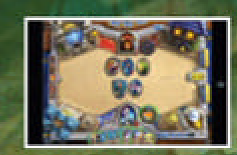
Lionhead seems to be taking its lead from Riot Games' massively popular MOBA with its rotating roster of heroes for those playing for free and some vanity items for those who want to stand out on the battlefield a little bit more.

Planetside 2



One of the strongest F2P FPS titles you could wish to play, this is a pretty epic experience for a shooter you don't need to spend money on. The in-game currency system is considered to be a little confusing, but the core game works well.

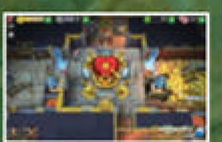
Hearthstone



There's no shortage of games for those who want to dip their hand into this trading card experience, and given how niche that interest used to be, making *Hearthstone* free is a big reason why it's become so massively popular.

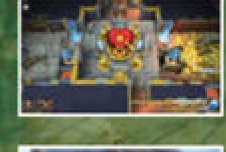
The Bad

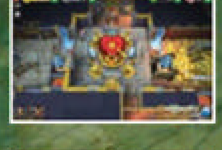
Candy Crush Saga



Often seen as a game that lures players into paying by blocking or limiting progress, *Candy Crush Saga* has a bit of a bad reputation. While it certainly offers no shortage of opportunities to spend money, it does not force the issue.

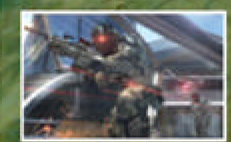
Dungeon Keeper





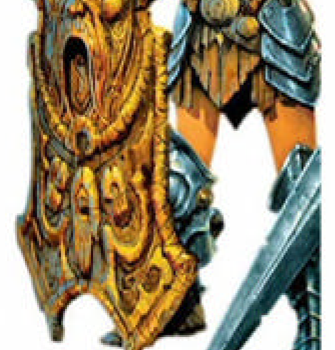
With slow progress without spending money, *Dungeon Keeper* appeared to showcase the worst of what an F2P game can be. it's subsequently been updated to be fairer and more transparent, but it's still a chore.

Ghost Recon Phantoms



Many consider this to be a pay-to-win shooter as buying premium weapons and armour seems to give a supreme advantage to paying players over free ones. It's understandable, but doesn't make for a fun gaming experience.

Lionhead has attempted to pack its heroes with personality, but you will still be able to customise them a little.



The technology was really the last piece in the puzzle. Running under the same principle of getting the game out to as many people as possible, giving them to chance to make up their own minds about *Fable Legends*, making the game available on PC, using DirectX 12 and making it cross-platform compatible went hand in hand with being free-to-play. It's all about bringing down the barriers to entry and being as welcoming and open as possible.

"We knew we wanted to be servicing PC in addition to Xbox, but then being inside of Microsoft and getting an early look at DX12 and the amazing things it could do really aligned us up pretty well," Eckelberry tells us. "Microsoft started to support us more as it looked like we would be one of the first DX12 games. So, they were totally on board with that and helping us along in that way. And giving us the support using servers on the backend to be cross-platform was fantastic. We want as many players as possible and not to have to divide them. If you're playing on PC and I'm playing on Xbox that doesn't mean we've made a choice that splits us up; we are still able to play with each other whenever we want."

The final stage of this experimental and challenging new direction for Lionhead is launching the game, but even that has been handled in a incremental and thoughtful way. There have been beta tests taking place with the public since late 2014, gradually increasing numbers and functionality to stress test the service and the ideas Lionhead has implemented. Ultimately, it appears Lionhead doesn't want to be just another studio that botches its online multiplayer launch, especially with a title that's already got plenty of doubt hanging over it.

"All the different servers that we utilise on the back end does complicate things, so we've seen a number of launches that struggle in their early days," Eckelberry explains. "For us, the critical thing for getting that right was basically launching to a small audience very early. That's why we started our closed beta as early as October of last year. We've been in it now for about six months and we've kept it small because we are encountering all sorts of issues. We are basically still in production, but that audience is critical for us identifying issues – technical, design, balance – and they are going to continue being critical to us for several months as we iron out these issues. It's so that, when we do embrace a very large audience, that they don't run into all the bugs we run into during the natural course of development."

"It's allowing us to see problems early and scale to them over time, so we don't have that initial drop in and panic of servers might be going down," adds Griffiths. "We are taking it very seriously. Stability and quality are very important to us."

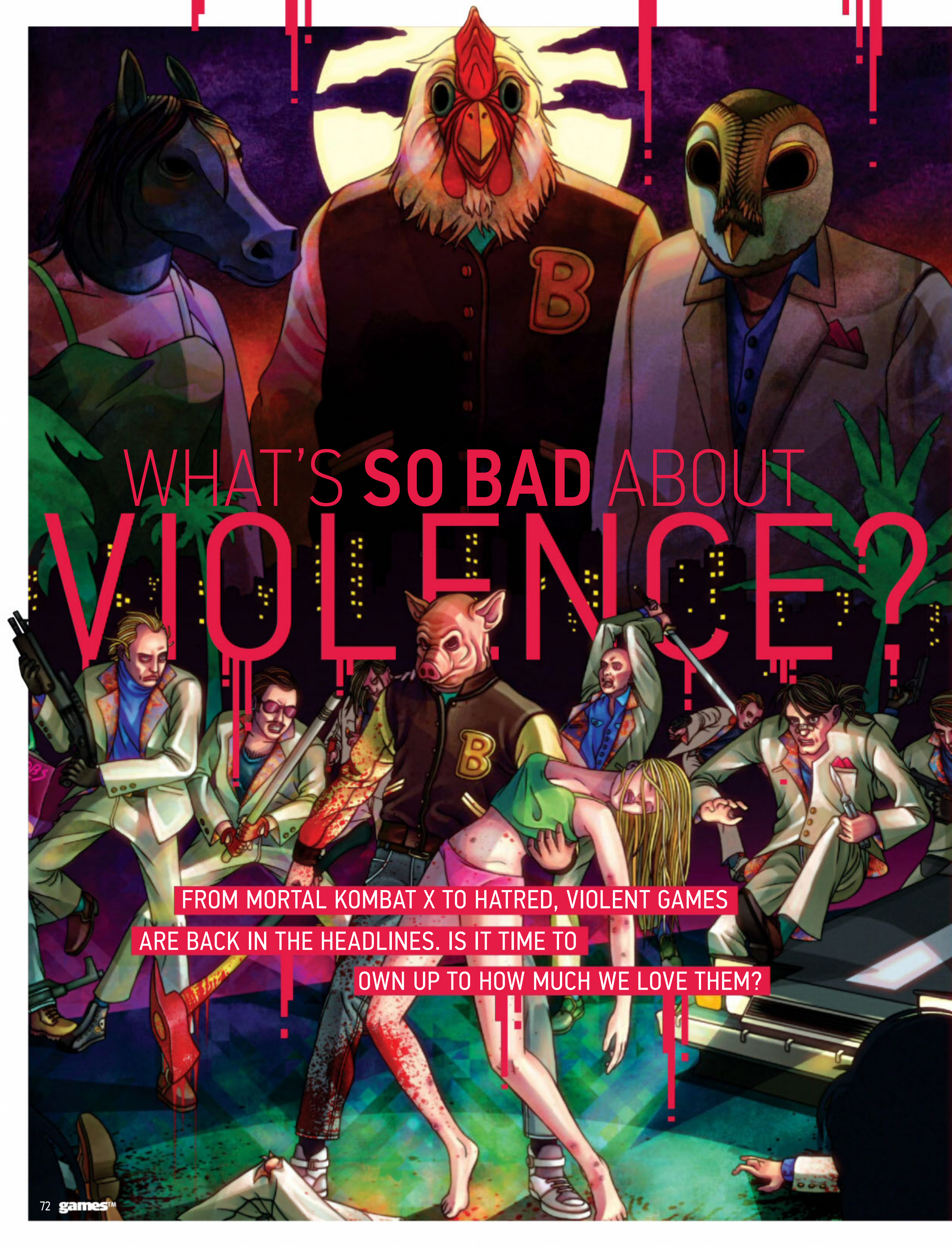
And so now, Lionhead is rolling out the testing even further. Xbox One and Windows 10 gamers should be keeping their eyes peeled for the release of a much wider public beta that should really show off what Lionhead has created thus far. You can still sign up on the *Fable Legends* site to express your interest and in the coming weeks you may well be able to join the team online.

"Over the next several months and into the summer, we are going to be adding new users at a pretty good clip," reveals Eckelberry. "If you're a fan and you're wondering why you haven't gotten included, the reason isn't because we don't want you in! It's just because we've had hundreds and thousands of users apply, and because we wanted to keep it small, it kind of means it was like winning a lottery ticket."

And with gambling analogies hanging in the air, we're left to reflect on the wholehearted way this newly arranged and refreshed Lionhead Studios has taken risks with its latest title. *Fable Legends* isn't the single-player RPG experience we would have expected, but it's not a safe spin-off either. It's trying out something new within the universe and it's embracing the change. We remain optimistic that a deeper adventure in Albion will emerge down the line, but for now we're happy to say that *Fable Legends* feels like a lot more than a stepping stone. If it all comes together, it could be a phenomenal new experience.

WHAT'S **SO BAD** ABOUT VIOLENCE?

FROM MORTAL KOMBAT X TO HATRED, VIOLENT GAMES ARE BACK IN THE HEADLINES. IS IT TIME TO OWN UP TO HOW MUCH WE LOVE THEM?



We love violent games. There's no point in trying to deny it. They've formed the backbone of our favourite gaming experiences over the last couple of decades. From the moment blood and gore could be depicted in pixelated form, we've lapped them up (if you'll forgive the rather gruesome image). They may be attacked and maligned and often used as the scapegoats of all our ills, but we have no shame in admitting our adoration.

If simply proclaiming this affection isn't enough for you and you would appreciate some proof of love then look no further than the 14 games that have had the privilege of being marked ten out of ten by **games™** in our 13 years. We would suggest that more than half of them are renowned, perhaps even infamous, for their graphic content. It may not have been the single reason why we loved them, but it certainly didn't appear to hurt our assessment.

"Human beings live for fantasy," asserts Running With Scissors CEO, Vince Desi. "Imagining oneself as a hero, a lover, a killer, all go hand in hand with fame, fortune and fantasy. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we acted out all our fantasies? Thank God humans can fantasise as a way of exercising their desires and satisfying their emotions." And as one of the people behind the *Postal* series, he would know better than most. There's an important escapism to be found in playing games. We often hear people saying that they find *Call Of Duty* or *GTA* relaxing as they can comfortably expel frustration or anger in a healthy way.

But they're not always viewed that way. The most recent controversy surrounding a violent game came from *Hatred* by Destructive Creations. As a dark, violent and seemingly rather cynical game where you play as a mass murderer, it didn't take long before it drew negative attention from the mainstream press. Perhaps what was most unique about the controversy, though, was that it seemed to split the gaming community in a way few games prior had done. Many seemed discomfited with the setting and gameplay of *Hatred*'s first trailer and it had even staunch defenders of gaming asking, 'Have we gone too far?'.

"The violence itself isn't any more exaggerated than in many games you play, it's just the way of telling what we want to tell," Destructive Creations CEO Jarosław Zieliński insists to us. "It is a game about a mass-murderer, so violence is inevitable." And despite that, Zieliński was surprised by the reaction. "I knew that it would make some noise and would bring some attention, but I never dreamed that it would reach such a big scale," he reveals. "Our game was covered in gaming press and major media such as *Forbes*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, etc. That's unbelievable to realise, because so far we are a small and unknown development team from nowhere."

What followed was a melodrama of attack and defence as the game was chastised by gamers, then defended, pulled from Steam Greenlight and then reinstated with an apology from Gabe Newell, "We are grateful to our supporters, fans and anyone who made it available on Steam in so short a time," Zieliński adds. "That means that adult gamers do need such gaming, they want to play *Hatred*, they want to support independent developers, because they feel that our game is more honest and fun than many titles they have played recently. And an honourable mention: Gabe equals GOD!"

That suggestion of being more honest is an interesting one and something that chimed with the thinking of Rebellion, makers of the *Sniper Elite* and *Zombie Army Trilogy* games who have pioneered the x-ray bullet cam. In some ways the interactivity of games means greater consequence can be portrayed with violence. "I think there is another debate to be had about how [violence] stands in the »



● *Hatred* is about mass murder. It's not hiding that fact, but it has still stirred up a lot of feelings. When the game releases it's likely to see a second storm emerge.

game and how it is portrayed and whether it is gratuitous," begins Rebellion CEO and creative director Jason Kingsley.

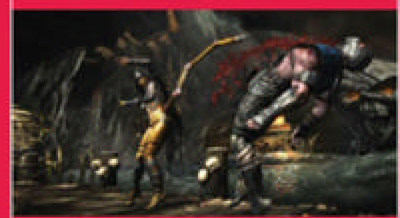
"Do you educate the player: 'This is exactly what a bullet does to the human body, and it's pretty horrible'? It's the complete opposite approach to the 'dinner-time TV shows' where people are using automatic rifles and people fall down, there's no blood and no bits, nothing happens to them."

Consequence and context can be important then and most games have some level of justification for their violent content. It may be overblown to the point of gratuity, but it originated from a deliberate intent of some kind. It's often when that context is removed for some reason (with violence depicted in a trailer, a short demo for promotional purposes or deliberately isolated in support of a particular agenda) that games get in the most trouble. "If you're not able to provide the full context to people who are critical reviewers of it, it can leave you exposed to 'I played this game and I saw something that was out of context and was jarred and it's left me feeling a little bit uncomfortable'," Devolver Digital's Graeme Struthers admits to us. It was something he and Dennaton Games experienced first hand recently with *Hotline Miami 2* and an implied rape scene in the game.

"Yeah, that's probably the best example we've had ourselves. From the game-makers' point of view, they wanted people to experience the entire game and make their own decisions about how they felt rather that this small segment of the game. And looking back I think it was a misstep that we should have thought about because it was there without context and that led to some people feeling uncomfortable. I can understand that as well. It wasn't something where we thought 'How can you possibly feel like that?'. As soon as that got said, we realised that there was actually no context to this particular part of the game. Hopefully now that the game is out, that context is there and people can see it the full picture." The scene itself is framed like the rest of the game as if it's all being portrayed by actors, so just before the awful assault appears to be happening a director calls cut and the scene ends. In the broader context of the horrible scenes the game references as part of a commentary on violence in media, it may not be so jarring, but on its own, many had difficulty with it.



● Despite many considering *Manhunt*'s sadistic setting to be gratuitous, it's not that different in themes from *Hotline Miami* today.



● *Mortal Kombat* seems to take pride in how far it can push its fatalities. The latest killer moves in *Mortal Kombat X* are a great example of this.

Desi agrees that context is very important. "In *Postal*, we want the gamer to experience an over-the-top totally ridiculous sensation of fantasy. How many aliens, people, soldiers, or zombies is the right amount to kill in a game? More important than the numbers is the context. Does a sex scene in a movie require full nudity? No, it's a matter of perspective. The game developer like the filmmaker or author is trying to convey an effect. Extreme emotions are expressed differently than subtle passive reflections."

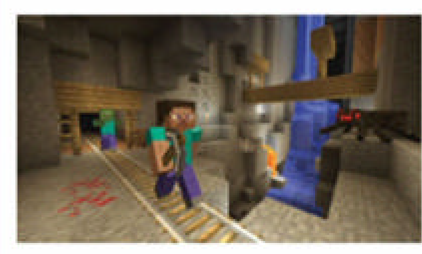
And that's really the most important point. Violence in and of itself isn't a reason to play or enjoy a game. But when it's done right, it adds substantial flavour. Were those ten out of ten games only great because of the blood and gore? Of course not. But their presence was a signifier of a more mature, open-minded approach to content, much as Devolver takes when publishing a game. "It's hard for me to step back and look at the range of games we're involved in and look at it from the point of view of what style we have, but we don't shy away from it either," Struthers explains. "If the game creator, in the case of Dennis [Wedin] and Jonatan [Söderström, makers of *Hotline Miami*], if that's the game they make, we have no editorial view on that. We just love the game they're making. I never really understood the





IS MINECRAFT TOO VIOLENT FOR KIDS?

That's what Turkey's been asking



One interesting violent game controversy you may have missed in recent weeks is that Turkey is investigating the possibility of banning *Minecraft* for sale to children on the grounds that it promotes violence. That's what the nation's Family and Social Policies Ministry is proposing in a report which says; "Although the game can be seen as encouraging creativity in children by letting them build houses, farmlands and bridges, mobs [hostile creatures] must be killed in order to protect these structures. In short, the game is based on violence."

At the time of going to press the courts are still to make a ruling on this recommendation, but it's a fascinating story and draws an interesting new line for what should be considered 'too much' aggressive content for children. Mojang, for its part, has recommended playing in peaceful and creative modes.

"DEVS ARE AFRAID TO CROSS CERTAIN LINES... THEY ARE AFRAID OF MARKET REJECTION"

● Much like its predecessor, the *Splatterhouse* reboot revelled in its violent content, spraying blood as far across floors and up walls as it possibly could.

Daily Mail-esque debate about games. It's always struck me as very low-hanging fruit to go after that issue and make out games are bad. I just don't agree with that."

And that's been the position of most gamers when it comes to conversations of violence; we go on the defensive. In fact, some of the developers we reached out to for this discussion bowed out because they didn't want to be drawn into that low-hanging argument. There's a tendency for everyone to end up with mud on them "There is an ongoing debate and overall it is something for the industry to consider," Kingsley admits to is. "It's also down to your audience: are you making an 18-plus rated game? Then I guess it's down to creativity and what sort of story you want to tell, like you would in a movie or a book. If you wanted to make it for a younger audience? Those under 18? Then you have a different set of parameters that you have to bring into play. We are very comfortable in the 18-plus horror genre, very firmly in that area, It comes down to what we as game creators feel is okay. Some will disagree. Some will think our game is too gory, but they have the right to think that."

Which begs the question, is there anything games shouldn't be allowed to depict? "'Allowed' implies permission and that in itself speaks to freedom of expression," Desi tells us. "Game technology should break technical boundaries but not concern itself with content. Creativity is rooted in the human spirit and it's not something that can be 'programmed' for the sake of commercial gain. That said, humans are greedy, so we should always expect and not be surprised by business decisions that take the cheap shot at success."



● *GTA* remains controversial; its sales make it easily the most high-profile adult gaming experience around.

For Destructive Creations, it's a question of fear. "Most devs are afraid to cross certain lines, because they are afraid of gamers' and publishers' reactions, they are afraid of market rejection," Zieliński tells us. "They don't do such games, because instead of listening to themselves, they tend to 'bend' to meet the needs of the market and publishers. This is a so-called 'safe way' to reach gamers and sell games – for some devs it's good, but it wasn't good for us any more. We needed to make a decision, and it seems that it works fine for us at the moment. Some may say that our marketing success is luck, but I rather consider it as a reward for courage and believe me, it was necessary to have balls when it came to showing our game to the world."

Game-makers must set their own terms and level of comfort. For Running With Scissors it's really very simple. "At Running With Scissors we've always had »



There was something nasty and satisfying about using the V.A.T.S. system in *Fallout 3*. Seeing heads explode became the only way to win a fight for veterans of the wasteland.



one element we *will not* use: children" says Desi. "We make mature games for the hell of it, but we choose not to exploit children as subject matter. It's a moral choice we've made and stand by."

Interestingly, *Hatred* also drew a similar line, having been inspired by *Postal*. "We didn't even think about killable children, to be honest," reveals Zieliński. "And you know, there is no torturing here, killing people in our game is just a cold-blooded elimination of your targets, quite a military style. Not because we're afraid to touch these subjects, rather because my vision was like that. The Antagonist is hateful, but not sadistic."

As much as many may have disagreed with some of the rating controversy around *Manhunt* for example, it seems logical that interactivity does make its depictions of murder very different from the passive experience of a movie. But crucially, it can only be said to make the experience different. Not better, not worse, not more or less manipulative. Only different.

In *Hatred*'s case, it seemed that some of the criticism was pre-emptive of criticism that would surely come, as if the game cast a negative light on the industry as a whole. It comes as no surprise that the maker of *Postal* was contacted by many outlets looking for a reaction. "Being Running With Scissors, we were immediately contacted by the media and gamers when *Hatred* was announced," Desi confirms. "We fully support their right to make their game, Hopefully the marketplace will determine its success and it will not be crippled by political correctness. The power of social media coupled with digital distribution is a beautiful thing, and a great advance for democracy."

And the digital, indie realm is definitely where we're seeing some of the most impressive commentary and contextual experimentation with violence. From *Hatred* and *Hotline Miami*'s more overt gore and gunplay to the subtler pixelated duels of *Nidhogg* or the cartoonish destruction of *Besiege*, there's a lot of boundary-pushing and clever interplay of story and gameplay going on. The debate rages on and developers keep feeding the flames in creative ways thanks to the rise of indie development.

"I think the outcome is that the industry is becoming more of a creative medium with the indie space," is Kingsley's assessment. "Indies can make a game about whatever statement they want to make. If you want to talk about nihilism or ultra violence in society? It's your money, you can do whatever you like if you're an individual author, it's obviously your right to do that!"

"IT'S YOUR MONEY, YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU LIKE IF YOU'RE AN INDIVIDUAL AUTHOR"

Ultimately, though, it has to come back to making a game that's fun. As we stated at the start we love these games not just for their content, but for the package of gameplay, themes, story, art and everything else. That's what attracted Devolver to *Hotline Miami* in the first place too, not the graphical content or how marketable that could prove. "We got the demo through from Cactus [game creator Jonatan Söderström] and sat down and started playing it because it was incredibly addictive," Struthers reveals to us. "I absolutely couldn't stop, I'm not very good at it, so I played it a lot. So, it's after the event, almost, in that particular case when you look at the game differently because at the time you're having so much fun and I think the consistent thing for us in looking for any game we get involved in that there's a key hook to the gameplay that just keeps you wanting to come back to do it."

And for all that *Hatred* has found itself at the centre of some furor over its content, making something engaging, fun and different is all Destructive Creations is interested in too. When we asked what we can expect from the final release Zieliński told us simply; "A lot of fun from destruction of almost any element of each level, tactical combat and an unusual, dark atmosphere of gameplay. But most of all – an evil grin on player's faces!"

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Tracking the moments where games 'went too far'







1976 DEATH RACE

It may have only been 8-bit, and rewarded you for running over gremlins, but the squeals they made as they were hit didn't endear this game to some and it was pulled off many shelves.

1988 SPLATTERHOUSE

Splatterhouse became notorious as one of the first games ever to feature a warning label because of its graphic content, even after edits were made. The full version didn't get a release until 2010 with a reboot.

1993 MORTAL KOMBAT AND NIGHT TRAP

When congressional hearings began into the content of games it was not only the fatalities and blood of *Mortal Kombat* that were under the spotlight, but also Sega's interactive horror experience.











1997 GTA AND CARMAGEDDON

It was a bad year for pedestrians as both DMA Design's first instalment in the crime series and Stainless Games vehicular combat game gained some unkind glares from those who took offence at the violent driving.

2001 GTA III

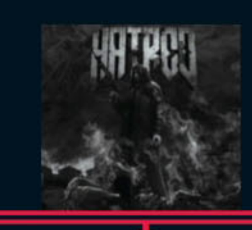
Once *GTA* moved to 3D, scrutiny became more intense with the game regularly brought up in cases of young people involved in criminal acts. Lawsuits were taken out against Rockstar and continued with many of the sequels that followed.

2003 MANHUNT AND POSTAL 2

With rewards for the brutality of your kills, *Manhunt* was a stealth actioner seemingly born to create controversy. *Postal 2* leaves the amount of violence up to you, but since its dark humour was lost on some it stirred up a backlash.







2009 COD: MW2

All of the attention around this game centred on a single, early level: No Russian. As an undercover officer you assist in a terrorist attack at an airport. You can choose not to shoot the civilians, but you can if you want. A strong example of a violent scene that split gamer opinion.

2011 BULLETSTORM

After being picked up by Fox News, the game's Kill Shot mechanic came under scrutiny for rewarding extravagant kills and in particular shooting enemies in the genitals. Dark and deliberately overblown, it sits well within the tradition of the genre.

2014 HATRED

Yet to be released and already stirring up fevered opinion pieces, *Hatred*'s unapologetic player-controlled antagonist sets out to mass murder the innocent. It's dark and challenging, but will it feel justified? We'll make our judgement once we've played the whole thing.



WHY I ❤...

DEMON'S SOULS

CHRIS ROBERTS, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES

It's a sad thing that since I started Star Citizen *I haven't been able to finish games so often anymore. I pick them up and I play for them for a bit, but then I've got to get back to work. But* Demon's Souls *was the one that grabbed me the most.*

Playing all the Gears Of Wars *and* Mass Effects *and the* Call Of Dutys *and the* Battlefields*, they were all super cool, [but] you feel like there's not really a penalty for messing up. 'Oh, I've been shot. No worries I'll respawn'. What I really appreciated about* Demon's Souls *was you couldn't do that and if you did you would lose a lot of stuff and be really pissed off.*

My sense of accomplishment for finishing Demon's Souls *was way greater than it would have been for other games, mainly because I felt like I earned it. So I would say there was a trend to make everything more accessible, but going too far in that direction loses the other thing that you want to have, which is a sense of accomplishment. You want to feel good about yourself that you managed to beat this level. You don't want to make your game so hard that no-one can do that, but you also want to make it more than just a time investment thing and that was the big* Demon's Souls *lesson for me.*



“My sense of accomplishment for finishing Demon’s Souls was way greater than it would have been for other games, mainly because I felt like I earned it”

CHRIS ROBERTS, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES

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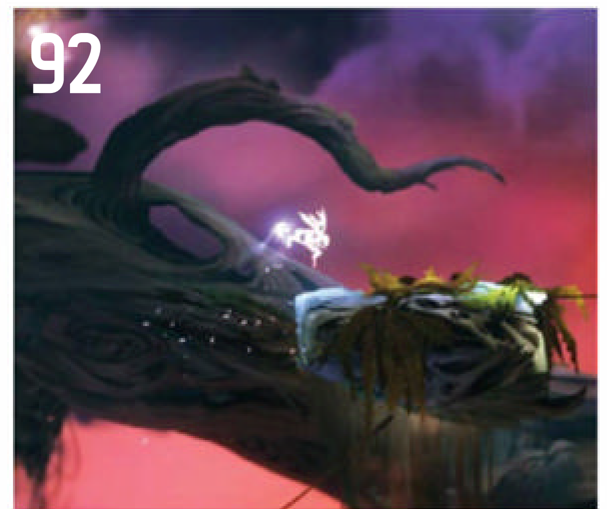
84 BATTLEFIELD HARDLINE

Can Visceral repair the Battlefield series' reputation and deliver a cops and robbers game worthy of the IP? Find out in our Battlefield Five-O review (see what we did there?)

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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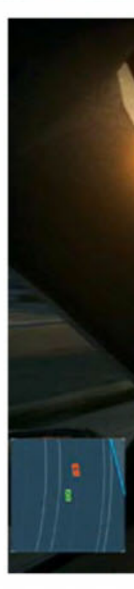

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IF ANY ONE THING TRULY MAKES THE PACKAGE STAND OUT, IT'S THE EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY OF THE MAP DESIGN

GOING ONLINE

While the difference between *Hardline* at launch and *Battlefield 4* at launch is night and day, there are definitely a few kinks that still need to be ironed out of *Hardline*. On public servers immediately pre-release, assist points have an annoying habit of not registering at all, spawn beacon icons inexplicably move around the map between spawns and kill cams can even latch onto ziplines after you die, which can be both confusing and very funny at least. *Battlefield 4*'s very wise recent decision – to patch out the ability to spawn on squad mates during combat – has inexplicably not been extended to *Hardline*, the MP5K weapon is grossly overpowered and 64-player TDM matches crash way more often than they should. Still, it's a massive improvement.





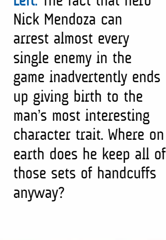


COP TO IT

Battlefield: Hardline

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One, Xbox 360, Playstation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Visceral Games
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-64
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Left: The fact that hero Nick Mendoza can arrest almost every single enemy in the game inadvertently ends up giving birth to the man's most interesting character trait. Where on earth does he keep all of those sets of handcuffs anyway?

While it is entirely possible to discuss *Battlefield* without mentioning *Call Of Duty*, *Battlefield: Hardline* is just not a *Battlefield* game. The sheen and thunder of DICE's Frostbite engine is unmistakable, and the loadout, perk, and Battlepack menus are all replicas of those seen in *Battlefield 4*. But if *Hardline* signifies anything, it's that EA is still chasing the dream of multiple FPS titles that it first began pursuing with 2011's wholly decent newfangled *Medal Of Honor*.

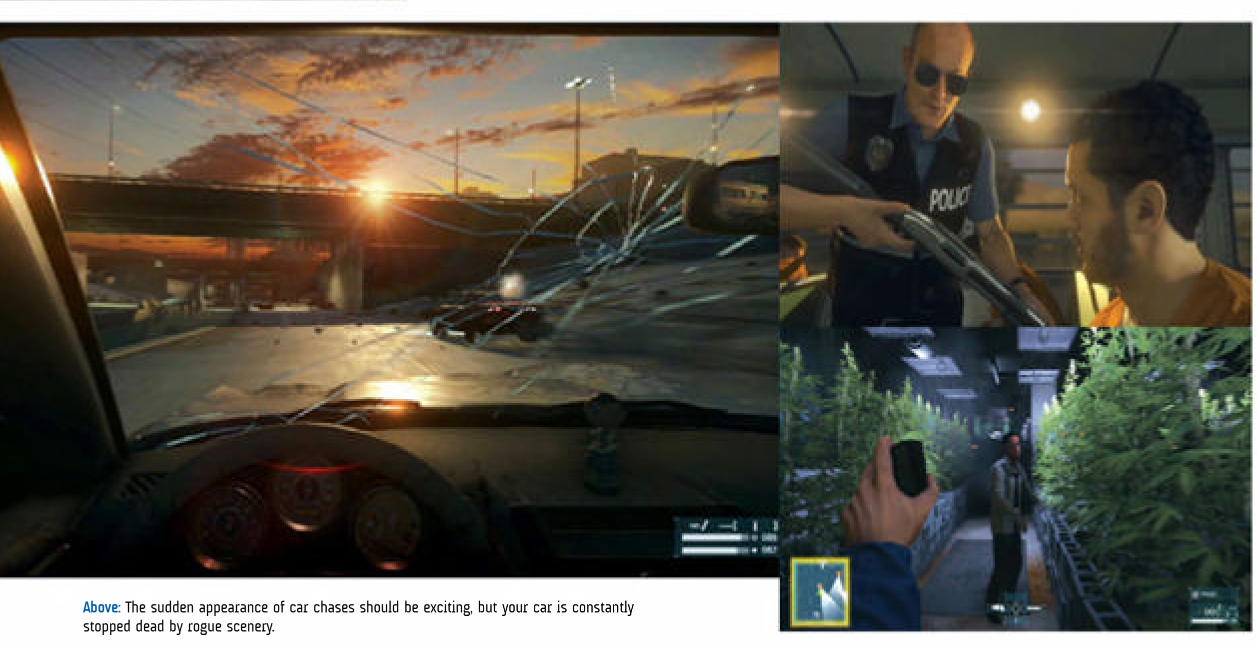
In many ways, *Battlefield: Hardline* is a perfect offshoot: a rethought, retooled and rather unusual experience that is destined to please far more people than it upsets. Yet despite the crucial presence of *Battlefield* staple Conquest, *Hardline*'s most significant debt is owed to *Call Of Duty*'s beloved Search and Destroy. Rescue and Crossfire, which are arguably the two finest modes in *Hardline*, are disarmingly similar to S&D: bomb sites are replaced by bound NPC hostages in the former and a playable snitch in the latter, and it is very difficult to find a fraternal link between classic *Battlefield* and the contemplative tension, lack of respawns and small teams that these new modes offer.

But if any one thing truly makes the package stand out, it's the exceptional quality of the map design. Visceral's debut as architects of multiplayer FPS arenas is absolutely first-rate across the board, and no less than three of the nine levels included here are destined to appear solo in perpetual rotation once fan-owned servers are made available to the public. The Block is a compact maze of inner-city housing, and instantly feels like *Hardline*'s answer to Operation Metro or Operation Locker. Growhouse is a dingy narcotics compound that almost always involves counterbalancing control of the ground with control of the rooftops. And Everglades was seemingly built with Hotwire in mind, featuring outskirts that are littered with jumps and hazards that call a

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ANGRIER CROCS: On the Everglades map, you will repeatedly encounter a canned animation of a startled crocodile disappearing under water. Surely an inventive mini-game could have livened this up?



Above: The sudden appearance of car chases should be exciting, but your car is constantly stopped dead by rogue scenery.



Left: *Hardline*'s campaign does that annoying thing where it asks you to chase an enemy down and simultaneously search each passing area for clues. Daft.

cherished *Mario Kart* course to mind. It's a fine-tuned, diverse collection.

As far as diehards are concerned, the only potentially sincere bone of contention comes in the form of the transformed class system; a pointed bastardisation of what many consider to be *Battlefield*'s very essence. On close inspection, the stripped-down nature of the new class system is nothing more than adept, tactful streamlining.

Rocket-propelled grenades – a genre mainstay – have been upgraded to power weapon status, available only from specific pick-up points on each map, chiefly to diminish the damage done to vehicles in Hotwire. Battlefield's more committed Recon players (called "Professionals" in *Hardline*) have always been fond of combining a spotting device (such as a T-UGS or a MAV) with a spawn beacon, which would have resulted in numerous tedious miniature stalemates in the new 64-player TDM. To combat this, spawn beacons have been given to Engineers (sorry, "Mechanics") and Professionals have no choice but to contend with a far less beneficial planted camera gadget. If you want to hole up and dominate an area like you could in *BF4*, you're going to need a supernaturally clued-up squad.

These simplifications do cause the odd problem though. In the smaller game types, because the Mechanic and Enforcer (read: Support) classes have had most of their heavy duty equipment removed, it isn't difficult to understand why most players choose to almost perpetually plump for the Operator class, which is *Hardline*'s rendition of Medic/Assault. Bringing a teammate back to life during a round of Crossfire is infinitely more valuable than almost any other tactic, and opting away from the Mechanic class when you're doing battle with vehicles (in Hotwire or Conquest) isn't a great strategy, primarily because your only other tactical option is to equip the Stunt Driver perk, which toughens up any vehicle that you commandeer. You do not know the meaning of the word tedium until you've been stuck in a game of Hotwire with a team of people who all have Stunt Driver equipped, and a mechanic by their side.

But these are quibbles. Visceral hasn't reinvented *Battlefield* so much as created the first properly viable by-product of it; a breathless tactical shooter that feels like *COD*, that feels like *Battlefield*… at the same time as feeling like neither of those two things. Flashy, vibrant and consistently ingenious in its design, the multiplayer side of *Hardline* bears almost no relation to the other half of the package, which should come as a surprise to no-one.

No discerning person has ever purchased a *Battlefield* game for its single player component, and true to form, *Hardline*'s campaign is quite astonishingly lacklustre. This is disappointing primarily because the first hour is so intriguing, but also because of how compellingly the campaign has been marketed. The game's opening sixty minutes or so (a section that was very craftily made available to EA Access subscribers on Xbox One before launch) feels like the beginning of the world's first ever meaningful cop simulator. The systems are simple – you scan environments and perps for clues, and are capable of arresting and detaining almost every enemy in the game as opposed to

FAQs

Q. IS RUSH MODE HERE?
No, and it's a strange omission. Squad Deathmatch, Obliteration, Defuse and Capture the Flag aren't included either.

Q. HOW LONG'S THE CAMPAIGN?
You can complete it in around 7-8 hours on the hardest difficulty, if you can stay awake for that long.

Q. HOW DOES IT LOOK?
On PC, pretty fantastic. On Xbox One and PS4, it briskly alternates between looking far better and far worse than *BF4*.



Right: The impossibly hectic Blood Money mode constantly asks you to choose between stealing cash from a bank, stealing cash from the opposing team's stash and protecting your own haul. The mode is intensified massively on maps where vehicles are available.



Above: One of the most brilliant aspects of Crosshair mode is that player extraction is extremely quiet. Snitches can zipline over a team of oblivious enemies to an extraction point, and get picked up before anyone even realises what's going on.

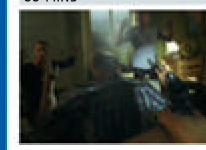
THE CAMPAIGN IS A MONOTONOUS GRIND THAT FEELS AS IF IT WAS DESIGNED EXCLUSIVELY FOR LAZY TROPHY AND ACHIEVEMENT HUNTERS

Below: *Hardline*'s naive excuse for a drama features a cast that includes Alexandra Daddario (*True Detective*), Kelly Hu (*Castle* and *NCIS*) and Benito Martinez, who portrayed *The Shield*'s iconic David Aceveda. To say that the game doesn't deserve them is an understatement.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

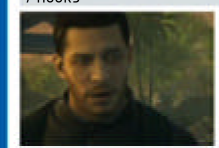
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



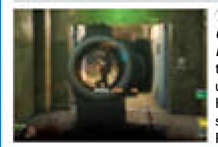
Groundbreaking is the wrong word, but the opening of *Hardline*'s campaign certainly makes some big promises. Could this be the best *Battlefield* story mode to date?

7 HOURS



The campaign fizzles out in a disheartening fashion, and replay value is wholly non-existent. Can the multiplayer side of things really salvage this sketchy and depressing mess?

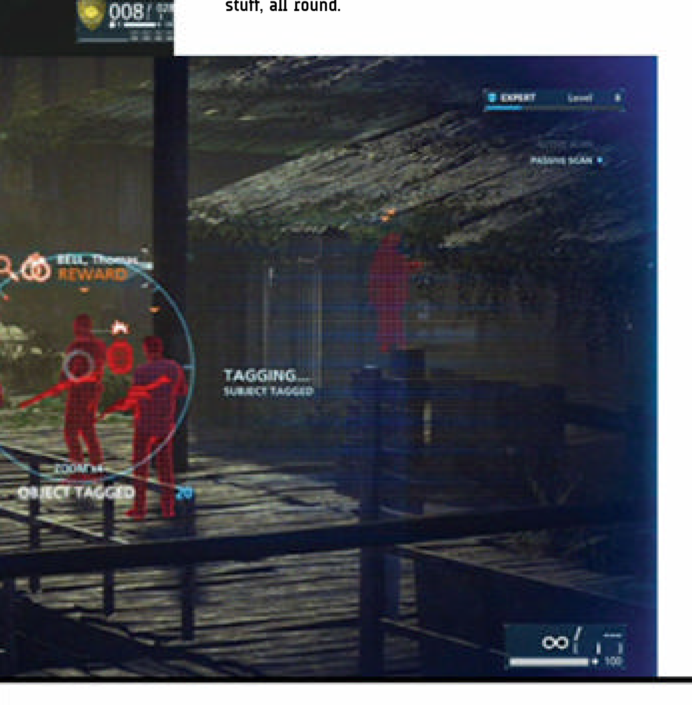
7 DAYS



Absolutely. It isn't *Call Of Duty*, and it isn't *Battlefield*. Whatever the heck it is, just give us more of it. Crossfire, Hotwire and Rescue are sheer genius. Roll on Premium.

NEW AND IMPROVED

Many of them are buried beneath the surface, but *Hardline* is filled to the brim with ingenious little alterations to the classic *Battlefield* formula; all of which deserve a place in subsequent outings. To combat the age-old problem of having to chase teammates around impotently yelling at them to drop health or ammo for you, now you can press a single button while in their vicinity to instantly get a small boost of either. Spotted players on your mini-map now appear in different sizes (to denote whether they are above or below you) and melee attacks from the rear are so long-winded that conversing squad mates now have an opportunity to rescue each other. Thoughtful stuff, all round.



gunning them down – but they do feel thrillingly singular for a brief spell. If you attempt to detain more than one perp at a time, your NPC compadre will keep their eyes (and gun) trained on the second party until you're ready to cuff them, and even though this was clearly a co-op system once upon a time, that realisation doesn't curtail the mellow buzz that's offered.

But then things go very, very hastily down the tubes. DICE has always produced single-player campaigns as if they were being forced to do so at gunpoint, and Visceral, despite its admirable *Dead Space* pedigree, has fared even less well than their stablemates. A sort of Fisher Price version of *Far Cry* punctuated by intermittent on-rails baloney, *Hardline*'s campaign is not even as compelling as the story mode contained in the widely maligned *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter*. It tells a bone-dry tale of double crosses, triple crosses, quadruple crosses, false double crosses, joke triple crosses and so on, and is one of those annoying stories that's comprised of nothing but plot. The hero is defined by the fact that he apparently once had a mother, the heroine is defined by the fact that she – but of course – once dated the main antagonist and 95% of the dialogue consists of plain, barked exposition. This would have been acceptable if the gameplay was worth a damn, but play is repetitive, ludicrously straightforward (even on the hardest difficulty) and flatly hostile towards the concept of player improvisation. It's a monotonous grind that feels as if it was designed exclusively for lazy Trophy and Achievement hunters.

The fact that *Hardline*'s campaign is called "Episodes" chillingly insinuates that more content might be on the way, but if *Hardline*'s Premium subscription contains any single-player content whatsoever, expect the community to be very, very upset. The Netflix-style presentation is cute at first, but it highlights Visceral's misguided belief that this is a story that's worth telling, and worthy of players' attention. It really isn't. Even the sequences that feel like they were intended to be swaggering highlights – the noisy prison bus escape, the screwball skyscraper freefall – are perilously tame and unexciting. *Hardline*'s campaign is inconsequential and stupid in ways that its multiplayer component is not. Personality is agonisingly scarce, but as ever, nobody should let a hogwash single-player element dissuade them from leaping into a bold-as-heck multiplayer suite.

In the end, the fact that *Battlefield: Hardline* could easily have been *Medal Of Honor: Hardline* or *Need For Speed: Hardline* is entirely moot. Visceral has played an ace, and it's a bona fide thriller.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GRAPPLING HOOKS: Using grappling hooks and ziplines on the larger maps is clearly beneficial, but people tend to forget about them on the smaller levels. Use that to your advantage.

VERDICT 8/10

FLOP CAMPAIGN, WONDERFUL MULTIPLAYER. STANDARD

RING-A-LING

Bloodborne's multiplayer component – integrated in the standard game, so long as you choose online mode from the main menu – is all about bells. One bell to ring for aid, one bell to offer it – if one of each is rung within a few minutes of the other (and character levels are appropriate), the player offering help will spawn into the player needing help's world. It's a simple system that works well in the most part, though requesting help does eat up Insight – part of *Bloodborne*'s currency – even though there's zero guarantee you'll get any. Hopefully that's an oversight that will be patched out, as right now it feels a bit too punitive, even for a game from Miyazaki. There's also a red bell, but you'd have to be a real monster to ring that one…



Right: Those naughty blighters invading your world don't feel quite as opportunistic as in the *Souls* games, thanks to *Bloodborne*'s back-and-forth duelling style of combat. You do, of course, still have to have your wits about you – or this might happen.

DOING ITS FAMILY PROUD

Bloodborne

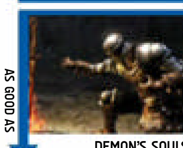
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: FROM Software
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-5
ONLINE REVIEWED: YES

BETTER THAN

DARK SOULS II





AS GOOD AS

DEMON'S SOULS

A few hours into *Bloodborne*, we encountered a shield next to a bonfire. After having to play through Miyazaki's latest in a manner we were wholly unaccustomed to, learning a new way in which to play and forgetting everything the director's previous *Souls* games had taught us, it was too tempting to pass up. We could equip it, wield a sword in the other hand, combat could go back to how it had been in those three previous titles we loved so much. It was almost comforting.

That shield is the only one in the game, so far as we know. It is also almost completely useless, placed in the game by a dev team with a sense of humour and a knowledge of the players who will be taking on *Bloodborne*'s challenge. It's a statement of change – the bonfire nearby isn't anything like the sanctuary it would have been in *Souls* games past, and the shield is more of a liability than an impenetrable wall to encourage plodding, defensive play.

This strikes at the core of what *Bloodborne* is about: it's a game that recognises and appreciates its history, never hiding from its roots – but it's also a game that uses what has been learned before and runs in a very different direction with it. If you're using a shield, you're stuck in the past. And if you're stuck in the past, you're going to get *battered*. We should know, we stuck with that wooden piece of crap for far longer than we should have, hoping beyond hope there was something about it we hadn't picked up on; a secret technique we could learn to make it... well, *useful*.

But defence isn't the way to play *Bloodborne* – this is a game of aggression, timing, dodging and countering. While it's not quite Platinum levels of insane pace and visual spectacle in combat, there is a feeling of something like *Metal Gear Rising* or *Bayonetta* to From Software's latest masterpiece. It's rough and uncompromising, but always tactical and technical. You'll be able to mash and spam your way through a fair few encounters, but only the best players will get through even the most basic of encounters unscathed. And the more you play, the more you notice nuance and clever design – elements that take *Bloodborne* from being good fun to being *great*.

It might be when you realise that, after being hit by an enemy, you have a window of a few seconds in which you can attack, each blow successfully landing netting a small amount of health back. Far from any kind of concession to less-skilled players, the system actually maintains a fantastic balance of risk and reward – using a health-boosting consumable will definitely give you more energy back, but it takes time to do so and could be a waste, as well as leaving you vulnerable to further assault. Attacking back instantly, on the other hand, would give you back almost all of the health you just lost and potentially off the troublesome enemy – but it could also mean a misstep, and another, bigger chunk of health lost as your foe capitalises on your mistake. It's so simple, but it entirely changes the dynamic of combat – every single fight, even those with enemies you've taken on 20 times already on a committed grinding session, is exciting and interesting.

The element that clicks in your mind might be when you finally 'get' guns. Handed to you from the outset, your choice of firearm doesn't seem to offer much in terms of genuine offensive capability. The odd ranged pop-shot to take out a weakened enemy aside, or a stun here and there with the blunderbuss notwithstanding, there doesn't initially seem to be a whole lot of use to the left-hand projectile flingers. The second boss you face, however, will teach you otherwise. Firearms are key, just as with aggressive tactics, allowing you – if timed right – to stun an enemy mid-attack and counter with a devastating close-up

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HEAD-ON: The *Souls* games were on the back foot and rewarded cautious play. While the same is sometimes true of *Bloodborne*, it is a far more aggressive game – and brilliant for it.

IF YOU'RE USING A SHIELD, YOU'RE STUCK IN THE PAST. AND IF YOU'RE STUCK IN THE PAST, YOU'RE GOING TO GET BATTERED

Below: You are unable to level up, using this here living doll, until after defeating the first boss in *Bloodborne*. It's not the hardest encounter in the game, but it sets a standard – and presents a challenge right off the bat.



Above: As in previous *Souls* games, *Bloodborne* allows you to watch the final moments of other players from around the world. As well as offering a bit of a pointer that something dangerous might be around, they also make you feel less... alone.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS

You're following in the footsteps of others playing the game, painfully aware that your death can and will come quickly and suddenly. As it has already, many times over…

8 HOURS

You're getting into the swing of things, you've successfully hunted some prey, you're almost getting a swagger… Well, time to get a reality check. Say hello to this fella.

14 DAYS

You've gone from confused, to compelled, to masterful, to beginner again – but you're finished. What else is there to do other than load up New Game+ and start over?



manoeuvre. Hit that, and you're on the front foot. Mis-time it – or just miss – and you've opened yourself up to be attacked. Yet again – so simple, so elegantly implemented, so smart a feature. It's mechanics like these we could wax lyrical about for hours – they're so *considered*, so very clever in their simplicity that it puts other, more basic games to shame. Rather than giving the player a pad-toting power trip, *Bloodborne* (like the *Souls* games before it) makes you *earn* your power trip. And then takes it away from you in bloody – *very* bloody – spectacular fashion.

There's been a bit of mention of the *Souls* games in this review, with obvious reason, but it's not merely an empty comparison for the sake of things: *Bloodborne* is very much of the *Souls* mould. The systems of collecting Souls (now Blood Echoes) is largely the same as before, with your accumulated haul lost the minute you fall in combat. It can be recovered, as long as you don't die again while hunting it down, but this time around there's a small twist – nearby enemies can pick up your echoes. This means it isn't a case of just sprinting to where you fell and picking up your haul before legging it – you may well *have* to beat an enemy to reclaim them. This makes for a much more cautious approach to new areas when you've a few thousand Echoes burning a hole in your pocket.

Another reason you're going to be more cautious is down to how spaced out *Bloodborne*'s lanterns are. These beacons of sanctuary take on the same role as the bonfires of *Souls* games past, but are far less common than they were before – especially in 'one every 20 steps' *Dark Souls II*. But the lanterns that do appear are well-placed, and a plethora of shortcuts will be unlocked as you progress through the world – which just goes to show how clever level design trumps the need for more safe zones every day of the week.

And *Bloodborne*'s levels are very cleverly designed. While maybe not as widely interconnected as those in *Dark Souls*, the city of Yharnam is a masterclass in good design. Initially you'll get lost (while being wowed by the views), slowly you'll come to recognise areas before opening genuinely useful shortcuts, then just as you begin to grow in confidence you'll stumble on another area you missed before and realise you don't know anywhere near as much as you did. The cycle begins again. The learning – and the discovery – never stops, and even though you're always hesitant to round the next corner, you still go ahead and do it – because you *want* to see more. You want to progress, you want to learn the next region of the city and its surroundings, you want to escape the hidden city, you want to get back to

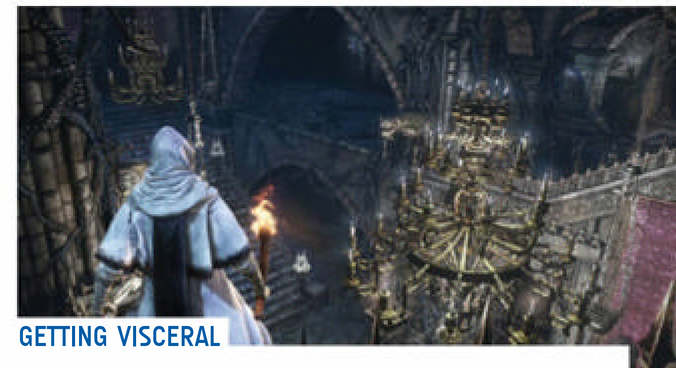
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LET US GRIND: Having to return to the hub, then go back to the world is pointless – people will do it regardless, and enemies don't stop respawning, so it's clearly something you're meant to do.

Below: It's a very dark world; a Victorian-themed dark fantasy full of glorious gothic architecture and genuinely foreboding natural vistas. Those looking for a colourful and fantastical take on in-game environments may want to look elsewhere.





GETTING VISCERAL

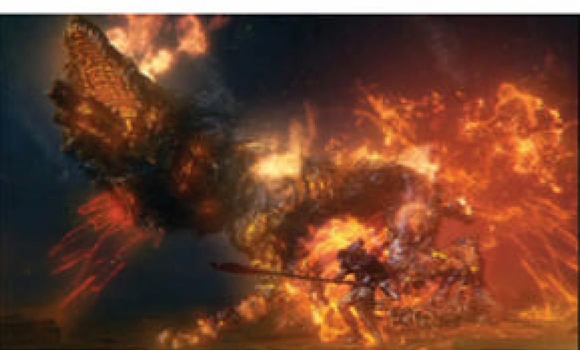
One of the most overused words in gaming makes an appearance in *Bloodborne* in the shape of the visceral attack – and yes, it does just mean 'bloody', rather than 'primal'. Still, we can ignore the name because it's an important technique that requires skilful timing and an iron will – shooting an enemy at just the right time (usually as they're winding up for an attack) will leave them momentarily stunned. It's a move that's useful against some tougher enemies, but one that really comes into its own when facing off against another player.

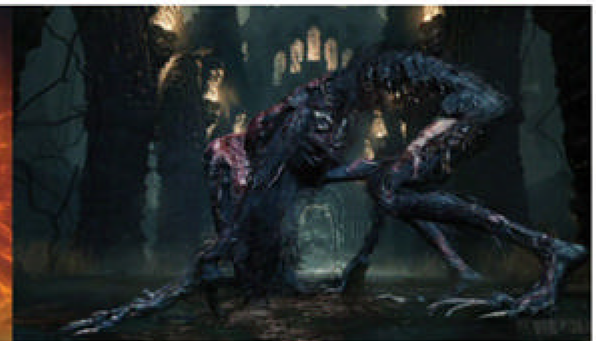
Left: As well as providing notes from other players – and some built-in pointers – these little minions can actually be customised. It adds a sense of character and, surprisingly, a sense of humour.

Right: Firearms take a bit to get used to, but soon show themselves to be essential in the majority of more difficult encounters.









Left: The Blood-Starved Beast – you'll likely get to know this boss very well, as it's easily the most challenging of the earlier encounters.

that ruined courtyard where the mob of wolf-people slaughtered you… you just *want* to be in the game world all the time.

Part of the reason for this has to be the atmosphere created through the story. While still a tale that doesn't explain itself in the clearest possible terms, *Bloodborne* is far less obtuse than its precursors. There's definitely a place for that particular style of storytelling, of course, but *Bloodborne* nails it with a mix of straightforward – it's the night of the hunt, beasts are abound, but who's the *real* monster? – and the more cryptic. It really does help you to enjoy the experience, adding a sense of place and purpose to what would otherwise be some aimless werewolf butchery.

The way in which Insight – another form of currency, earned mainly by encountering bosses – is implemented into the story is another great feature. It would be unfair to explain it all here, as a big part of the fun is the realisation that dawns – but safe to say, more Insight is a valuable, but possibly dangerous, thing. Those who know more do suffer more with that knowledge, after all…

So *Bloodborne* is perfect and wonderful and the best thing ever, then? Well, no. It could have been – it really could. It's easily one of the best

FAQs

Q. WILL I LIKE IT?

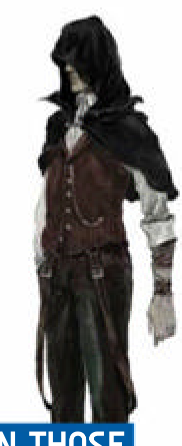
If you didn't like the *Souls* games, there's little about *Bloodborne* that will turn you to its cause.

Q. IS IT ALL SO DARK?

Light-wise, yes. Atmosphere-wise, not so much. *Bloodborne* has a sense of humour, if you look hard enough.

Q. WORTH BUYING PS4 FOR?

It's hard to say any one game is worth buying a whole console for, but *Bloodborne* is up there with the absolute best.



EVERY SINGLE FIGHT, EVEN THOSE WITH ENEMIES YOU'VE TAKEN ON 20 TIMES, IS EXCITING

games this generation, definitely the best game on the PS4 and up there with the big-hitters of the all-time lists, but it does have failings that hold it back from an even bigger number at the end of this text. And it's a shame, because they all feel like things that could have been – and might still be – fixed. Technical issues rear their ugly heads a mite too often, with frame-rates dipping and the action juddering; while only in certain busier areas, it can ruin your flow and result in an explicitly unfair death.

Then there are issues with design that we fail to see the logic behind (and quietly hope are mere oversights that will be patched out). Summoning a co-operative partner to help your quest to not die for a bit longer involves spending Insight. That's fine – you pay for a service. But the Insight is consumed regardless of whether you get help or not, and there's absolutely zero guarantee anyone will be ringing their bell at the same time as you. That's a random element, and as such feels unfair – Insight is a valuable currency and not easily available, especially if you're not so great at the game.

Respawning is another thing that confuses – there's no feature like in *Dark Souls II* where enemies ceased respawning after you'd taken them on a set number of times, meaning *Bloodborne* does facilitate the act of grinding. But there's no ability, like in *Souls* games, to just 'touch' the lantern and have the world reset around you. Instead you have to exit the world back to the Hunter's Dream hub area, before going *back* out into the game world, which will then be reset. It's an unnecessary step in a process that – owing to the continuing respawning of enemies – we can only assume is something the developers did want you to do.

Beyond these issues – and some won't even see them as that, to be fair – there's little else that raises eyebrows. People have been questioning the decision to move from the Estus flask system, in which players had a set number of health replenishments to hand (recharged at a bonfire), to a more standard system of consumable health packs dropped by enemies. These don't require much care and attention to be paid, and you can go out there and farm them 'til your pockets runneth over. But it works, and you never feel anything near invincible even with 20 health vials in your pocket. It's a matter of personal taste.

Ultimately that's what a lot of *Bloodborne* comes down to: personal taste. It does nothing that will convince those who didn't enjoy the *Souls* games to join the love-in, and those who were fans of Miyazaki's previous games but might have wanted something genuinely different this time around will be let down. But that's clutching at straws – *Bloodborne* is an incredible game; tight in its mechanics, logical in its systems, rewarding, intense, gloriously frustrating and exciting in equal measure. The PS4 has its first absolutely essential game. As if there was ever any doubt.

VERDICT 9/10

THIS GENERATION'S FIRST TRULY ESSENTIAL EXCLUSIVE.

IT FEELS EXPENSIVE AND LUSH, A TRIPLE-A GAME IN THE 'INDIE' SPACE

SOUL CRUSHING

Ori And The Blind Forest's difficulty is not something that can be underestimated. This is a crushingly difficult platform game, one that has more in common with *Super Meat Boy* than it does *Super Mario Bros*. It assumes its players are experienced and dextrous, and makes absolutely no excuses for them. And it's clear that it's not just Nintendo that Moon Studios has fawned over. *Ori* has more than a few nods to *Dark Souls*. The respawning enemies, the limited save system, even the punishing enemies – this is a game that also seems to take pleasure in hurting its players. *Ori* doesn't have *Souls*' relentless sense of dread, but under that pretty surface is a mean, tough bastard.



Right: The map is filled with secret areas, some of which require specific power-ups to access, others just your own skill. It's worth exploring every inch of the map – some of the best platforming challenges lie hidden behind secret doors.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Global (remote development)
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Moon Studios
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

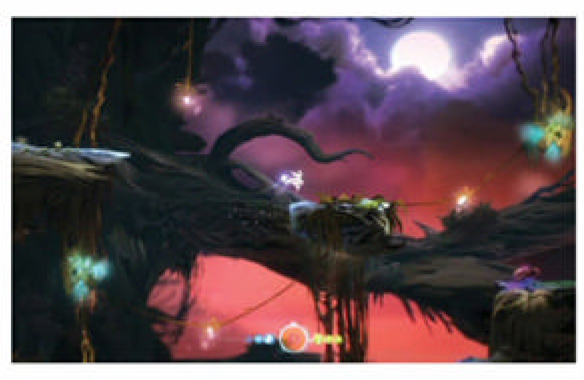
LEGEND OF HELLDA

Ori And The Blind Forest

***Ori And The Blind Forest* might be the most deceptive game ever created.** Just look at it. Gorgeous, cartoon visuals. Lovably cuddly characters. Fairies. Trees. It's a kids' game, right? That's what Moon Studios wants you to think, because Moon Studios is comprised of sadists who take great thrills in knowing that players are suffering. This is a platformer only rivalled in its punishment by *Super Meat Boy*, and it might just be as good. You play as the titular Ori, a sort of forest spirit, who must restore light to the dark… nothing you haven't heard before, but Moon Studios is very hands-off on the story and heavy on character and setting. *Ori And The Blind Forest* isn't an original game but it is a breathtaking one – every element is executed with tremendous precision and the deftest of touches.

The studio itself has branded the game a metroidvania, and it is the simplest and most recognised way to categorise platform games that deal in exploration, ability-hunting, backtracking and discovery. *Ori* is most definitely that, but tonally it has more in common with *Zelda* than anything else. The abilities you discover along the way have direct consequences in gameplay, and within the first few hours your basic toolkit has expanded to the point where even basic movement opens up huge possibilities for navigating the map.

At first, you can move, jump, and attack. A little fairy called Sein joins you on your quest, and she can be sent out to attack enemies with a repeated jab of the X button. It's very simple, but allows combat to take place on multiple planes. So, as soon as you get used to dealing with an enemy on horizontal ground, how about taking on two while wall jumping? *Ori* is a game that teaches you a technique, then stretches the very notion of how that technique can be applied. It's world-class design. And it has to be to justify this level of difficulty. Platformers have rarely shied away from a challenge, but this is something else. You're constantly asked questions of yourself, with precision jumping, then precision jumping under fire, then precision jumping with a spike hazard… you get the picture.



Above: Like *Dark Souls*, sometimes you have to walk away from *Ori And The Blind Forest*. It's so difficult that you begin making stupid mistakes, and that only leads to more frustration. Less haste, more speed.

An early power-up shows just how clever Moon Studios is and how much it wants to push the platforming envelope. You pick up a kind of dash attack, which lets you smash through enemies. Standard stuff, right? Well, it also allows you to springboard off enemies, or the projectiles they hurl at you, meaning you can use enemy attacks to gain higher ground. Further still, any projectile you use to elevate yourself actually shoots off in the opposite direction, so you'll find challenges where you have to use enemy fire to smash through barricades in order to progress. And you'll have to do that while in mid air… again, you get the picture.

But it's *Ori And the Blind Forest*'s save system that really compounds its challenge. Other tough platformers give you an instant restart, lessening the pain of repeated failure. In *Ori*, you have to create your own save points, using a finite resource that is also used by some of your abilities. You quickly learn that saving regularly is vital when you lose ten minutes of progress. But resource management is also crucial; it's a cruel world.

This balancing act is toughest at the beginning of the game, where your health and 'soul' (the save-game resource) slots are at their smallest. While the physical difficulty ramps up massively as you progress, it does become less of a risk to plant a save point down. Not that it will stop you from forgetting at the least opportune moment possible.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LUSH COSMETICS: *Ori* is a truly beautiful game – somewhere between a painting and a classic Disney movie. The music is wonderful, the story concise and heart warming, and the characters fantastic.

All this (valid) talk of difficulty must not get in the way of what Moon Studios has achieved here, though. *Ori And The Blind Forest* is a truly sumptuous videogame; utterly gorgeous to behold, scored wonderfully, and with a sense of adventure, wonder and triumph that harks back to those classic *Zelda*s and even more classic cartoons. It feels expensive and lush, a triple-A game in the 'indie' space. It's an unusual choice to make a game that looks so accessible yet insists on brutally kicking your arse, but without the challenge, *Ori* would be half the game. The sense of achievement in even navigating a small platforming section is tremendous, and it plays in beautifully to the game's narrative. This isn't a friendly bedtime story; this is a game that wants you to live that struggle. It can even feel euphoric.

As wonderful as *Ori And The Blind Forest* is, though, it just falls short of true all-time classic status. A lack of signposting at key spots isn't exactly criminal, but does lead to some tiresome backtracking. Some particularly nasty sections rely too much on trial and error rather than purely reactive skill, too. These instances are rare but just frequent enough to be disheartening. To nitpick, the occasional frame-rate hitch on Xbox One can be devastating when you're trying to pull off the world's most intricate platforming sequence.

But this is still something very special, a work of rare craft and beauty, and almost certainly the best exclusive on Xbox One. Essential.

VERDICT 9/10

GORGEOUS, BRUTALLY DIFFICULT AND UTTERLY WONDERFUL

BETTER THAN: GUACAMELEE



WORSE THAN: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

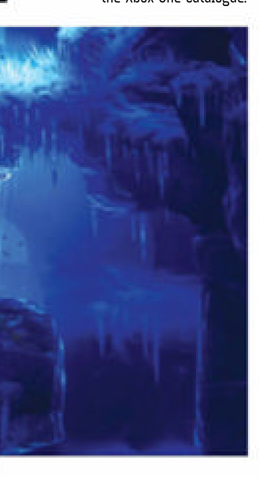
FAQs

Q. IS IT A KIDS' GAME?
Hah, no. It looks like one, but young players will barely get past the first twenty minutes.

Q. WHERE WAS IT MADE?
Moon Studios actually has no official home base – *Ori* was built by creators based all over the world.

Q. BEST EXCLUSIVE ON XBOX ONE?
It's certainly up there. Obviously there's a PC version too, but this is a reason to look outside of the PS4.

Above: The game is stunning in screenshots but truly breathtaking in motion. There's no better-looking game on Xbox One, despite the lack of a third dimension. The artists at Moon Studios are incredible.



Left: *Ori* deserves to be held up as one of the shining lights of the Xbox One catalogue.

DEEP SPACE THROMBOSIS

Sid Meier's Starships

Right: The hexagonal galaxy map immediately marks this as a game with roots in *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, even if the underlying gameplay is less complex and, ultimately, less rewarding.

In recent years, the notion of interacting with your favourite game universe via a variety of means has become increasingly popular. Companion apps, comic books and free-to-play spin-offs for a number of high-profile titles have all been used to varying degrees of success.

Sid Meier's Starships is one such proposition. 2K is keen to promote its ties to the recently released *Civilization: Beyond Earth* but while it also appears on PC and Mac, it has clearly been built from the ground up as a fully-functioning iPad title and a number of design decisions fully embrace the notion of pick-up-and-play gaming on the go. As such, despite being set in the same universe and sharing a number of superficial thematic ties with Firaxis' 4X phenomenon it actually suffers from the association, finding itself cast very much in the shadow of its parent-franchise rather than standing proudly alongside it. In fact, with its breezy, turn-based battles and basic unit upgrades it's most appropriately compared to Sid Meier's recent dogfighter, *Ace Patrol*, than the life-sucking *Civ* series.

The action in *Starships* is split between two planes. The first is the galaxy map, where *Starships* establishes visual kinship with *Civilization* through the use of territories consisting of hexagonal tiles. At the centre of each cluster of hexagons is a planet that yields varying amounts of key resources, which are automatically collected at the start of every turn. Establishing cities and basic space-age improvements on these planets bolsters the yield of the resources provided, with each resource fulfilling a specific role as currency (see Living in a Material World boxout). This simplification of resource management and a lack of longer term interconnected economies is indicative of the streamlined systems at play in *Starships*. In all cases, resources are required to improve the efficiency and strength of your galactic empire rather than serving as an expression of the kind of empire you want to create.

Expanding that empire to a winning mass of fifty-one percent is the most straightforward of the four victory conditions and is achieved by gaining influence over neighbouring planets. This is accomplished by visiting planets with your fleet and successfully completing missions for them, which always involve engaging in combat. Despite boasting names like The Galway Apparition, The Palatine Fallacy or The Galation Problem the missions fall into a handful of basic types that include destroying the enemy fleet, protecting an allied transport or seizing and holding several control points.

Missions begin with a briefing of the objectives and an assessment of the enemy fleet in the area. At this point, it's possible to make modifications to your fleet of starships or add an additional ship to your armada. Outfitting your ships with lasers or plasma cannons determines whether they will excel at long-range or close-quarters combat, while balancing engine power with shield coverage and armour value will result either in

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac (OS X 10.9), iPad (iOS7)
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista SP2/ Windows 7, Intel Core 2 Duo 1.8 GHz or AMD Athlon X2 64 2.0 GHz, 2 GB RAM, 256 MB ATI HD2600 XT or better, 256 MB nVidia 8800 GT or better, or Intel HD4000 or better integrated graphics, 841MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Above: Aesthetically, the whole production is a little sparse and there are no visual sliders or graphical effects to switch on or off. However, the flavour art helps spruce up otherwise dry menu screens.



Right: Successful strategy involves predicting enemy movement as well as using the right tool for the job. Forcing a foe close to a cloaked starship armed with a heavy duty plasma cannon allows you to take them out in one hit.

BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP AS A FULLY-FUNCTIONING IPAD TITLE AND DESIGNED TO FULLY EMBRACE PICK-UP-AND-PLAY GAMING ON THE GO





FAQs

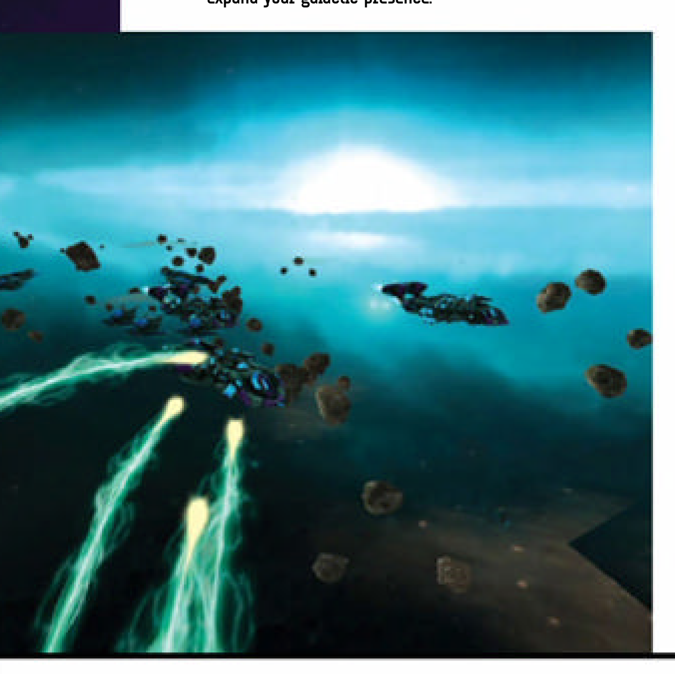
Q. STARSHIPS OR BEYOND EARTH?
Starships is far more immediate, *Beyond Earth* offers longer-term gratification.

Q. WHICH FORMAT IS BEST?
The slim-line turn structure and immediate feedback make *Starships* best suited to iPad.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THE INTERFACE?
Starships is perfectly suited to a touch-optimised interface, though an undo button would be helpful.

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Metals, Energy, Science, Food and Credits are the myriad currencies of *Sid Meier's Starships*. Most can be put to a single use but the Credit Exchange is on hand to swap a surplus of any one thing for a handful of credits, which can then be used to buy planetary influence or to purchase a resource that you might otherwise be lacking. It's another example of how Mr Meier (who serves as both designer and programmer on *Starships*) has endeavoured to streamline the resource gathering so familiar to *Civilization* players and, by doing so, shift the focus from gradual empire building to swifter acquisition, thereby ensuring that every turn brings new ways to expand your galactic presence.



a heavily defended ship or a lightly armoured and swifter craft. Final tweaks to sensors, stealth devices and a deployable fighter unit round out the customisation options and, typically, you're best served by having a range of starships under your command in order to respond to whatever the enemy fleet may throw your way.

For the most part, that amounts to little in the way of resistance, at least not on the regular difficulty level where you can regularly defy the low-percentage chance of success that your pessimistic combat advisor suggests you have. However, up the difficulty level and increase the map size and battles start to become much more closely contested games of galactic chess, where it's sometimes necessary to sacrifice one of your units to secure a hard-won overall victory.

These battles play out on *Starships*' second plane of play, the tactical map, which is also divided into hexagonal spaces and strewn with a collection of space debris, such as asteroids that can be used as cover to jump gates that transport your craft to another randomly selected position on the map. Line of sight and vulnerable flanking positions necessitate intelligent ship positioning to capitalise on canny predictions of where the enemy is likely to try to strike next. There are also randomly assigned battle cards, which can be used to confer a particular bonus once per battle, such as additional movement or more effective weapon fire.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BETTER WITH FRIENDS: As a single-player offering, *Starships* is enjoyable but of limited scope. A multiplayer mode would go a long way to adding a degree of longevity that the campaign mode lacks.

Success in battle wins a degree of influence over the planet that issued the mission and so it's possible for several leaders to have a stake in a single planet, each drawing a proportion of its resources each turn. However, as a population victory is achieved by securing fifty-one percent of the galaxy's population, the larger planets are usually the most fiercely contested and valuable. It's possible to win through by other means, such as destroying the rival leaders or trading the science resource for half a dozen high-level techs, but as the best way to accomplish anything is by completing missions to claim rewards and amass resources, the population victory often becomes the path of least resistance.

Outside of all of those hexagons, *Starships* borrows a selection of leaders and affinities that loosely ape those found in *Beyond Earth* but ultimately boil down to choosing one bonus over another rather than meaningfully informing the way you play. *Starships* is a reasonably enjoyable experience in its own right, whose relatively swift pace can see games last hours rather than days and whose bite-sized missions perfectly suit iPad play. Played in bed or on the train it offers a fun diversion but for those sitting down in front of a PC or Mac, its *Civilization* trappings make it hard to recommend over the far more accomplished *Beyond Earth*.

VERDICT 5/10
NARROWER IN SCOPE THAN ITS GRAND THEME SUGGESTS

A PARTY WITH SOME UNINVITED GUESTS

Mario Party 10



Above: There are nine different themed Amiibo boards that can only be unlocked if you own the figure in question. Predictably, the Rosalina board has a Mario Galaxy theme, complete with little Lumas watching the action at the sidelines.

After putting the *Mario Party* series on a five-year hiatus, Nintendo released *Mario Party 9* on Wii in 2012, bringing much-needed innovation to the franchise. This tenth entry, content to stick with what was a warmly received addition, retains this gimmick for its main mode.

The five new boards are designed with the vehicle mechanic in mind, with straight A-to-B routes rather than the endless loops of the past. Games end not after a certain number of turns, but when the vehicle reaches the end of its journey. When you're grouped together with your opponents and partially in control of their movement it's easier to sabotage them: there's little that's more satisfying than stopping the car right in front of a hazard, forcing the next player to go through it and lose valuable mini-stars.

There are only two real issues with this mode. First, each board's set length means games are disappointingly short – especially for *Mario Party* veterans used to epic 50-round contests. Second, Mario Party mode essentially ignores the Wii U GamePad, forcing every player to use Wii Remotes during both the board game sections and its 51 mini-games.

This is addressed in Bowser Party, the second major mode and one built entirely around the Wii U's unique controller. One player armed with the GamePad controls Bowser, and it's their job to catch up with the other Remote-wielding players and make them lose all their hearts. Both the board sections and the mini-games make clever use of the GamePad's potential for asymmetric gameplay, most notably when the Bowser player can place hidden hazards on the board without the other players seeing where they are. It's a great mode, but with only three playable boards and ten GamePad-friendly mini-games, it gets repetitive very quickly.

Rounding things off is Amiibo Party, which makes use of Nintendo's NFC figures. Scanning one of nine Mario toys makes a themed board appear, around which players can take part in more traditional *Mario Party*-style gameplay. These boards are a little basic, and the constant need to tap your Amiibo on the GamePad for every turn feels gimmicky and unnecessary.

With its three distinct modes *Mario Party 10* tries to simultaneously appeal to fans of the ninth game, long-time series traditionalists and those seeking something innovative. While its efforts are commendable, each mode's major niggles mean all three groups will merely be content, not delighted.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nd Cube
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

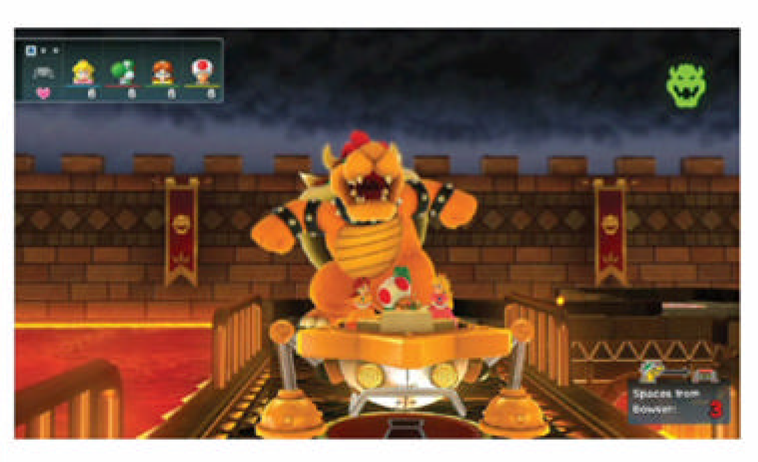
SINGLES NIGHT: Solo players won't get much out of *MP10*. We'd have liked a single-player mode similar to *Mario Party 2*'s Mini-Game Coaster, in which players had to beat every mini-game in succession.

VERDICT 6/10

ANNOYING ISSUES MAKE THIS A BIT OF A PARTY POOPER

Below: There are a handful of other standalone mini-games, including a puzzle game and this badminton one. They pass the time, but chances are you aren't going to be coming back to them for months to come.





OBSIDIAN'S RALLYING CRY TO CLASSIC RPG ENTHUSIASTS

Pillars Of Eternity

Pillars Of Eternity is an homage to a bygone age: a time when developers knew what 'tactical role-playing combat' actually meant.

This is a 2D isometric RPG where every skill point, piece of equipment, ability and decision matters. The gameplay is so freeform that you could create a band of miniature rogues and attempt to dodge almost every unfriendly encounter, or charge through quests as a party of nimble elf archers and wizards. You could also turn up the difficulty knob and subject yourself to a gruelling experience where the next fight could be your last.

Obsidian has carefully weighed the traditional pause-and-play RPG elements against new features, making *Pillars Of Eternity* more than a simple reminder of an earlier, brainier genre. It's accessible, rich, rewarding and utterly without mercy.

When a major event happens in a quest, you will wonder how many other ways it could have played out. You will want to create new characters with different skills and see what those outcomes look like. The dynamic between you and your foes will also change depending on how you adjust your party's skill mix.

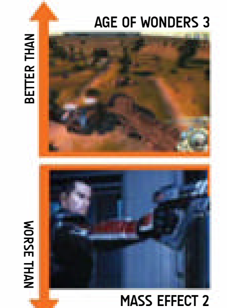
In battle, it's rarely a simple matter of swarming enemies until they fall. Your foes all have skills, classes and abilities of their own, and you can expect them to use smart tactics to overwhelm you.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac/Linux
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Obsidian Entertainment
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista 64-bit or newer, Intel Core i3-2117 @ 2.50 GHz / AMD Phenom II X3 B73, 4GB RAM, ATI Radeon HD 4850 or NVIDIA GeForce 9600 GT, 14GB available space, DirectX Compatible Sound Card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

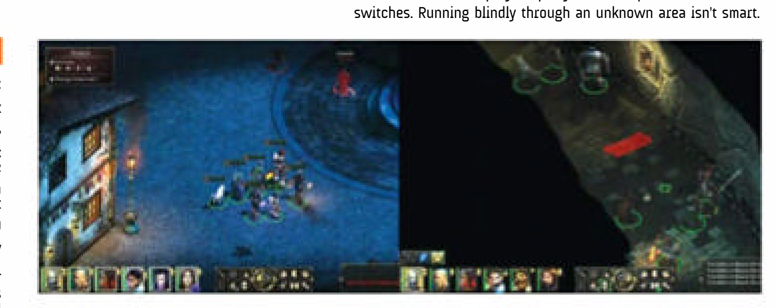
AGE OF WONDERS 3



WORSE THAN

MASS EFFECT 2

Below: Sneak mode helps your party detect traps, hidden loot and switches. Running blindly through an unknown area isn't smart.



Every battle has degrees of cost and this level of commitment to *Pillars Of Eternity*'s philosophy is appreciated. More importantly, the fixed isometric perspective doesn't make it too difficult to understand what's going on.

Sure, there are occasions when you inadvertently coerce a party character to cast a spell or use a knockdown ability on one of their allies. When your group is in a crowded space indoors, it's easy to click on the wrong target in the heat of the moment, but a handy zoom function can eliminate most of these incidents.

Every backdrop is beautifully rendered, with 3D-effect visuals peppered across the more elaborate locales, and the foes you're up against are as varied as you'd expect from a tactical RPG. There's also a good dose of sound effects to go with combat, particularly when spells begin firing off.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FRIEND MAKER: Feel like shaking things up a little? You can create a new adventurer to join your party, choosing every detail of their skill, class and race to suit your needs.

The story and lore surrounding Eora, though detailed and well-written, doesn't grab as much attention as the combat – but you won't care. You'll venture off the main path, picking up side quests, experience and items while testing yourself against hardier challenges.

Pillars Of Eternity embraces complexity, inviting players to try new approaches and understand the finer points of pause-and-play combat. Obsidian has finally made the RPG we all knew they were capable of making and it's damned glorious.

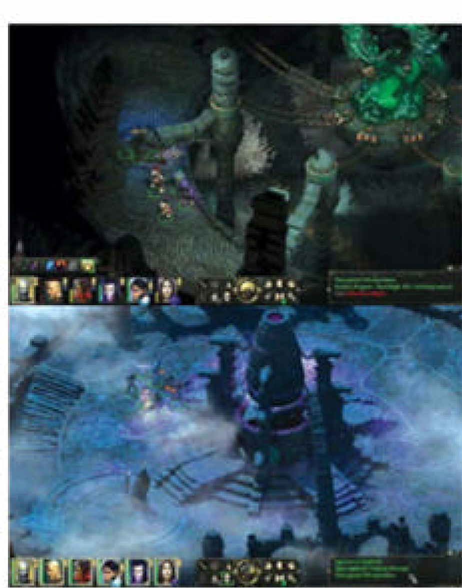


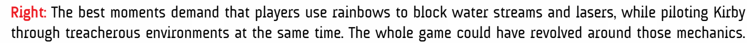
VERDICT 9/10

A BEAUTIFUL RPG – ESSENTIAL PC GAMING



Above: A Druid can transform into a savage animal form for battle – in this case, a bipedal stag with clawed hands.





Right: The best moments demand that players use rainbows to block water streams and lasers, while piloting Kirby through treacherous environments at the same time. The whole game could have revolved around those mechanics.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: HAL Laboratory
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 8th May 2015
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

KIRB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

Kirby And The Rainbow Paintbrush

It may seem churlish to attack the latest offering from Nintendo's unsung mascot for not having any surprises in it, but *Kirby And The Rainbow Paintbrush* makes the lamentable mistake of invoking 2010's *Epic Yarn*; arguably Kirby's finest hour to date, and a noteworthy burst of substantial invention and finesse. *Rainbow Paintbrush* may feature a new universe composed of splashy Plasticine, but it's all for show; never once threatening to revise the gameplay like *Epic Yarn*'s world did half a decade ago.

Kirby has always been among Nintendo's most malleable properties, but what's most surprising about *Rainbow Paintbrush* is how derivative it is. There are clear-cut nods not just to *Mario*, but also to *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Donkey Kong Country*. The game's ruthless adherence to what is clearly Nintendo's current battle plan (exploit a single idea for as long as possible before discarding it) may serve to keep proceedings attractive and nimble, but the lack of originality means that play is neither distinctive nor memorable.

Like its spiritual predecessor (2005's *Kirby: Power Paintbrush*, a DS mini-masterpiece), *Rainbow Paintbrush* has been devised with handheld consoles in mind. Charging Kirby's primary attack involves pressing the stylus on the pink blob for almost two full seconds.

The game offers a bombardment of resourceful and mechanically sound gameplay situations; one minute you're piloting a tap-happy tank in a shoot 'em up, the next you're carefully conducting the firepower of an obstructed submarine.

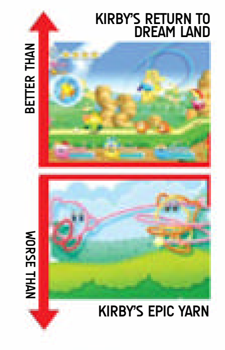
It offers the kind of challenge-free entertainment that is ideal for younger players: the secrets aren't well hidden, the checkpointing is nothing but charitable and you only have to die thrice before a level-skip option crops up. In many ways *Rainbow Paintbrush* is a perfect gateway illustration of what Nintendo does best: gratifying ideas melded with terse and endearing presentation. Elements of it may appear lackadaisical - the fourth world's sudden introduction of a ground-based fail state is surprisingly brutal, for example - but the ideas do not stop coming, and for parents who are trying to expound the magic of Nintendo to their indifferent offspring, this might just be as good a tool as any.

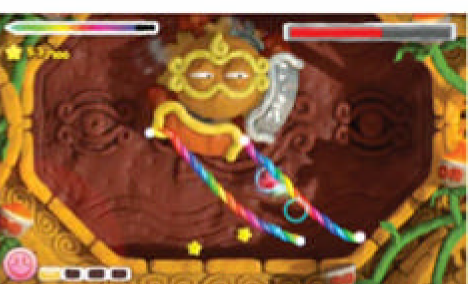
Kirby And The Rainbow Paintbrush is overshadowed by the games that inspired it, and its relatively taut duration and a scarcity of innovation mean that it may not linger too long in your memory. But if children are in the equation? Go for it.

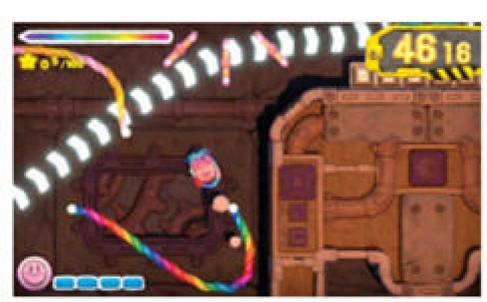
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BANG BANG: It may only be a small piece of the pie, but when *Kirby And The Rainbow Paintbrush* briefly turns into a shooter, it is an adept and highly enjoyable one.









VERDICT 7/10

A FINE GAME, IF NOT A GREAT ONE

ITS EYES ARE UP HERE

Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-2 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

DEAD OR ALIVE 5 ULTIMATE





ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

WORSE THAN

Playing *Dead Or Alive* is an experience similar to reading *Playboy* for the articles. There's some genuinely quality stuff in there if you can paddle through the waves of bosoms, but you still feel awkward when a family member sees you indulging in it. *Last Round*, being a improved version of 2012's mammary-heavy *Dead Or Alive 5*, does nothing to alleviate this quandary.

What's certain is that *Dead Or Alive* has never looked this good. Rendered at 1080p and running at 60 frames per second, the detail extends to improved character models. It also makes use of Team Ninja's new Soft Engine, which results in skin so detailed you can see blushing. It's genuinely impressive, even if staring at it for too long makes you feel like a deviant.

This improved visual quality is the main selling point of *Last Round*, as everything else is more or less business as usual. The Story mode has been lifted straight from *Dead Or Alive 5* and remains untouched. The standard Fight and Online options are present and accounted for, with no other modes added.

The only other major addition is two new characters: Raidou, the boss from the original *Dead Or Alive*; and Honoka, an 18-year-old schoolgirl (naturally). These bring the character roster up to 34, making it the biggest in any *Dead Or Alive* game to date.



Above: Honoka and Raidou are the two new characters in *Last Round*. Honoka is completely new, whereas Raidou was the boss in the first *DOA*, though here he's reborn as a cyborg.



WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

OFFLINE ONLINE: If you're playing offline but want to get some practice in for online multiplayer, there's an option to turn on 'online lag simulation', adding lag to single-player modes. Now that's dedication.

Even despite this, it still isn't really the definitive version of the game. Whereas Capcom's Ultra Street Fighter rewarded players with every DLC costume previously released for the previous version, *Last Round* refuses to follow suit. Those wishing to have the full package, then, will need to buy two DLC bundles – one offering all the DLC from *Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate*, and a Season Pass offering new upcoming costumes – which each cost over £60. That this is constantly forced on you with an obnoxiously large "Check out the DLC!" banner on the main menu every time you start the game makes it all the more grating.

It's worth noting that there's also a free-to-play version of *Last Round* entitled *Core Fighters*. Containing only four characters with other fighters and the Story mode available to buy separately, it's a good way for fans of the series to gauge whether the visual improvements alone are enough to justify buying the full game.

For those who don't already have a version of *Dead Or Alive 5* however, this is undoubtedly the best way to play it. Put up with its farcical levels of misogyny and you'll find an approachable, satisfying fighting game that feels smoother and looks sharper than it ever has before.



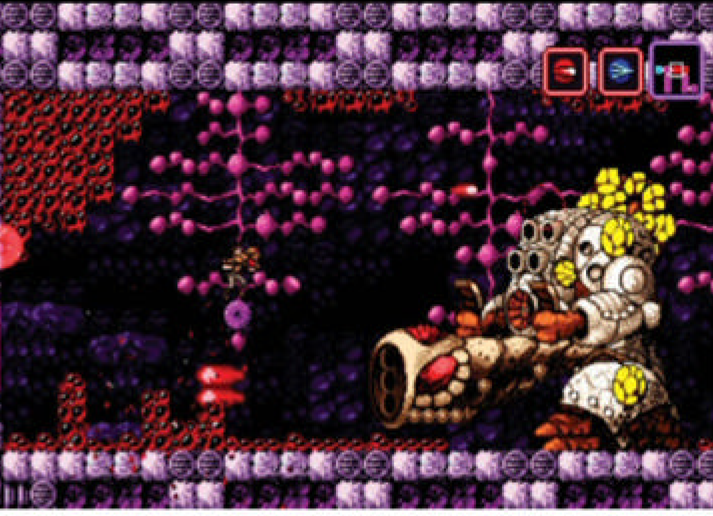
Above: As in *Dead Or Alive 5 Ultimate*, there are four guest characters from Sega's *Virtua Fighter* series: Akira, Pai, Sarah and Jacky.

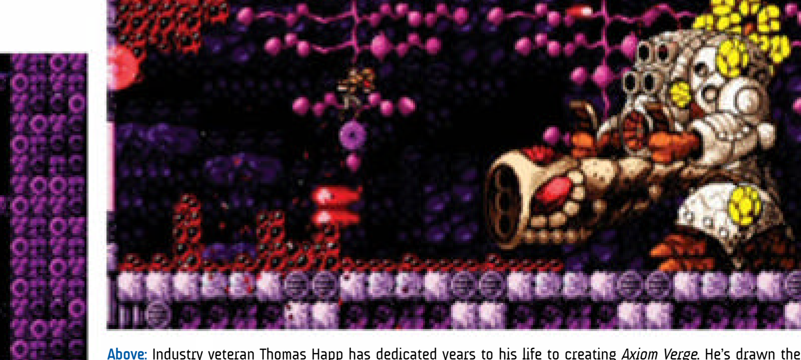
VERDICT 7/10
THE BEST VERSION TO DATE, BUT NOT DEFINITIVE

HAUNTED BY ITS INFLUENCES

Axiom Verge







Above: Industry veteran Thomas Happ has dedicated years to his life to creating *Axiom Verge*. He's drawn the assets, designed the game, coded it and even recorded the music. It's all very impressive for a one-man effort.

At what point does a videogame, so unabashedly influenced and clearly defined by what's come before it, cease to be a homage and simply become a derivative work? That's the line *Axiom Verge* cautiously treads and occasionally teeters on. To be perfectly candid, this isn't just another metroidvania looking to ride the resurgent popularity of the genre – following in the footsteps of *Guacamelee* and *Shadow Complex* – it is *Metroid* incarnate. Or, at least, it's trying its damnedest to be.

Impressively, nearly all of the genre boxes are checked off the list by lone wolf developer Thomas Happ. *Alien*-inspired 8-bit pixel art, (*check*); challenging but fair combat, (*check*); thundering chip-tune soundtrack, (*check*); wonderfully gruesome bosses, (*check*); and a lead character who appears to be nothing more than Samus Aran with a Y chromosome, (*check*). But in desperately seeking to create a design-by-expectation metroidvania, Happ has failed to instil any real sense of personality or identity into *Axiom Verge*, which *Metroid* has in spades.

It's certainly possible to take a dormant concept and approach it with everything the industry has learned – and perhaps more importantly, forgotten – about game design over the last three decades and make it work. *Shovel Knight* and *Rogue Legacy* are the proof here, but *Axiom Verge*'s non-linear game world doesn't feel cohesive nor convincing. Exploring the connected corridors, overcoming the design puzzles and locating the immensely well-hidden power-ups and weapons quickly becomes a bit of a chore. The science fiction world lacks any depth, while areas and enemy design seem too random to forge a cohesive environmental-led narrative. It makes your strange journey surprisingly uncompelling, which a great shame.

Thankfully, the core combat is pretty on-point. The Address Disrupter, for instance, lets you take advantage of the glitchy sci-fi world and hack certain enemies into sprite blocks – which happen to make rather fantastic floating platforms. A drill attachment helps you blast through otherwise inaccessible areas of the map and weapons such as the Nova gun unleashes a ball of energy that can be triggered to explode – helpful when facing multiple enemies or bosses that can only be damaged from behind.

Some impressive innovation towards the second half of he game lifts *Axiom Verge* considerably, but if you're after a genuine and whole-hearted twist on the tried-and-tested formula, it will disappoint.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS Vita
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Thomas Happ
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



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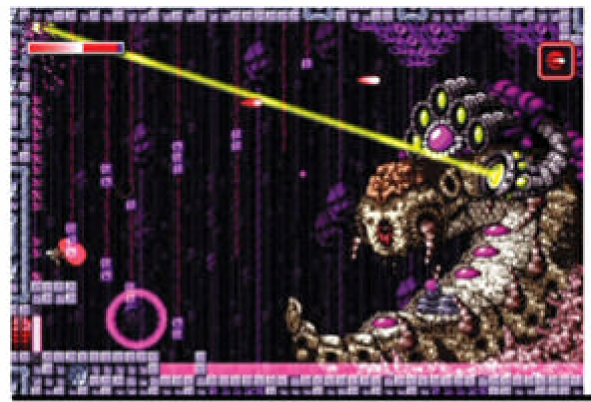
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

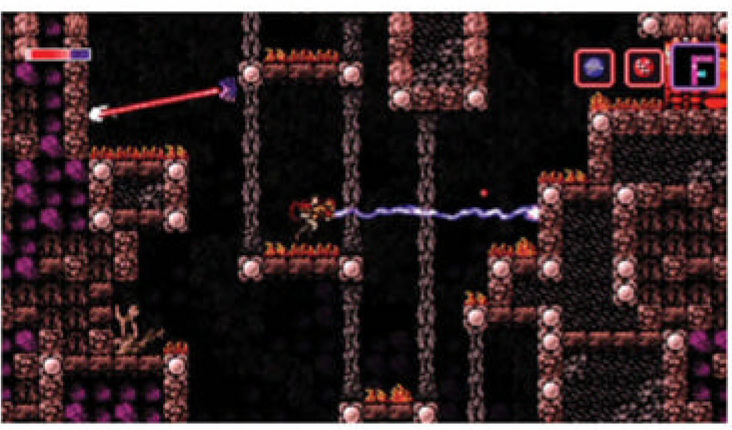
MAIN MAN: A better lead character would do wonders to make the world feel alive. Trace lacks charisma or any energy; it's just deflating to play as him.

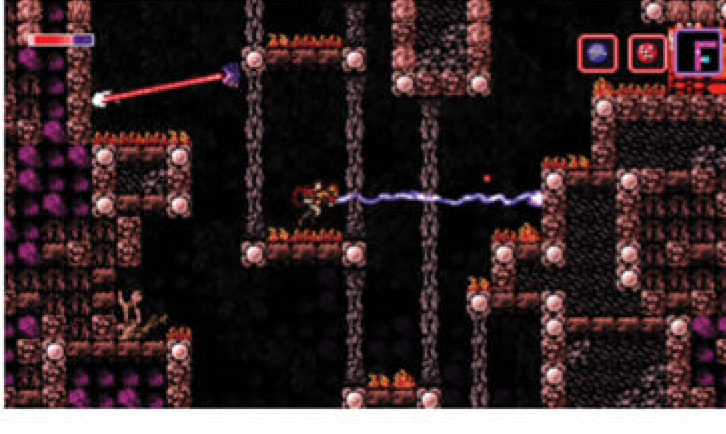
VERDICT 7/10

AN ACCOMPLISHMENT, BUT IT OFTEN FEELS TOO SAFE

Below: *Axiom Verge* wants to so desperately be looked at as a 25-year-old metroidvania that it feels like it has lost a little magic and creativity in the process. Ultimately, you can't force these things and it feels like *Axiom* could have done with a producer's touch.







Left: Everything's better in co-op, especially riding golden Griffons.

Right: A standard "storm the base, kill the commander" skirmish.

THE HUNDRED YEAR CHORE

Bladestorm: Nightmare

Despite being from the same developer, *Bladestorm* isn't really a *Dynasty Warriors*-type game Sure, you will be cutting through swathes of enemies on vast battlefields, only here you will be holding buttons down instead of mashing them for combos. It's an attempt at being more strategy-based, but in truth, the systems aren't enough fun and, crucially, without curing the hangovers from the original 2007 release, it all seems archaic.

As a mercenary trying to make a name for himself during the Hundred Years' War, you'll control a variety of squads, each strong and weak against various enemies, across a sprawling campaign with set objectives. Here, it *is* like a *Warriors* game, as you thin out the enemy numbers in order to draw out a base commander. Kill him and your objective of capturing the base is achieved. There's not much more to it than that, and although you can level up your fighter-types, most of your time will be spent in battles.

It's quickly apparent that horses are the best way to play, simply because the battlefields are so large that using anything else makes it a chore to get between fights. In fact, the only time you'll switch to a different type is when you find yourself up against certain base commanders that are strong against the horse-type. This problem is enhanced because you also get to control other squads, who seem to possess no brains whatsoever. If you are off battling, you can switch to another squad and find them doing nothing. The solution is to group up and command a larger force, but this also leaves you vulnerable. You can't leave a squad at a base, because you can't predict which will need defending. The best cause of action is to group up and take your chances.

There are moments of excitement - cutting through thirty enemies at once and levelling up is a blast, though has rapidly diminishing returns - but the whole experience just feels like a drag, designed to be played piecemeal, despite having a campaign that will take most people in excess of 50 hours.

The new Nightmare mode is interesting, ignoring historical accuracy in favour of fantasy, allowing you to ride Griffons and fight Goblins. The fact that your created character carries between modes is nice, but since the opening boss of Nightmare mode is around level 30, you'll be forced to play at least a few hours of the 2007 campaign before being able to approach it.

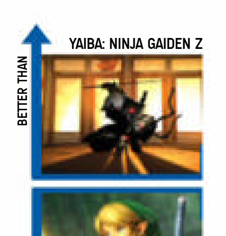
But in all honesty, there's just no escaping the sad fact that *Bladestorm* feels like a dinosaur. Last-gen visuals, dodgy voice acting, and repetitive gameplay mean that there's just not much here for newcomers, especially if not played with the online co-op. Fans of the *Omega Force* games may find more enjoyment in *Bladestorm: Nightmare*, but only in small doses.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z



WORSE THAN

HYRULE WARRIORS

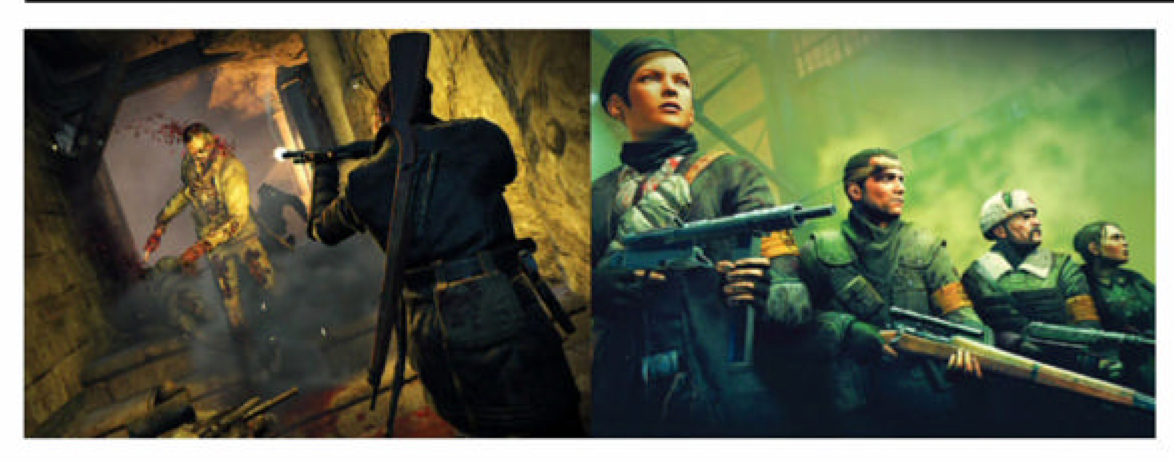
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GETTING A HEAD START: A pre-levelled up character would mean you could get stuck into the new content without needing to play the 2007 campaign as things currently stand.

VERDICT 5/10

ONE THAT ONLY HARDCORE FANS WILL ENJOY



Left: Rebellion has based some of its playable female characters on real-life women involved in World War II, such as Russian sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko.

ZAT OUT OF HELL

Zombie Army Trilogy

The very concept of Nazi zombies has become a weirdly prolific subgenre. We've seen plenty of zombie modes in *Call Of Duty* over the years, and *Zombie Army Trilogy* itself began life as expansions for the *Sniper Elite* series. But does stretching what is a series of kitschy add-ons into a dedicated title kill the joke?

Thankfully no, or at least not quite. Rebellion's confusingly-named offering's greatest strength is in not overstaying its welcome. It knows it's not a groundbreaking epic, nor does it pretend to be. It's unpretentious fun, making up its eponymous trilogy with remastered versions of the first two Nazi Zombie Army campaigns, plus a final one rounding out the story – demonic Hitler raising the dead to overwhelm the Allies, a desperate quest to find an ancient artifact to undo the necromancy; y'know, the usual.

However, despite the undead cosplay and added flourish of gore, the *Sniper Elite* roots are unmistakable. Sniper rifles are the most varied weapon class in the game, and the ones with the most plentiful ammo. A score multiplier based on consecutive headshots only reinforces that the presence of secondary weapons from SMGs to shotguns, and an ever-present pistol sidearm are afterthoughts. Like the parent game, the highest difficulty setting challenges you to account for wind resistance and realistic physics. Even X-ray kill-cams for skilled shots return, though they seem less gratuitous given the bad guys are already dead. And Nazis. There's a nice balance in the weapons on offer, with enough nuance for the hardcore shooter fan to discern the difference between loadouts but simple enough for casual players to get a handle on. Last ditch melee attacks, incendiary tools, and the ability to set traps or trigger environmental hazards also keep things lively.

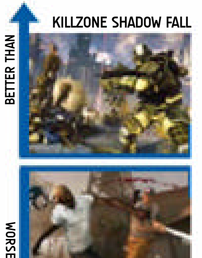
While it holds up to solo play, with roughly 12-20 hours in the core campaigns, multiplayer is stronger. Missions scale according to number of players, creating some truly manic sessions, as close to a new *Left 4 Dead* as we're going to get. The co-op focus is emphasised with four playable female characters and four male characters.

Diversity in the playable cast doesn't equal diversity in gameplay though. Too often, *ZAT*'s structure lends itself to repetition – kill this group, defend that location, rinse, repeat. A new Horde mode crystallises this with its endless waves of enemies and only so many tactics to halt their advance. In general, there's little to differentiate it from any other shooter's comparable modes. While there's still fun to be had, it's of a singular nature. No awards for innovation then, but strong group play and a tongue-in-cheek atmosphere make this worth a shot.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Rebellion
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-4 Online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: KILLZONE SHADOW FALL



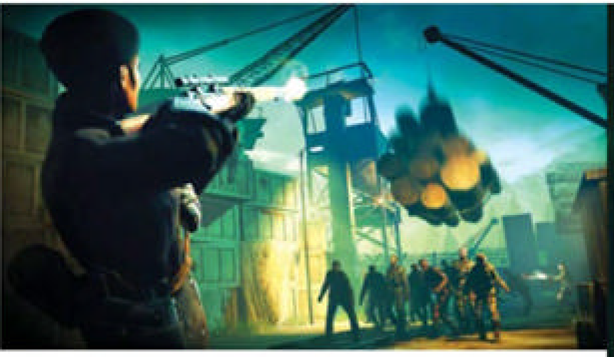
WORSE THAN: LEFT 4 DEAD 2

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DEAD END: *Zombie Army Trilogy* isn't entirely linear, but more open worlds wouldn't go amiss. Multiplayer is still fun, but it would extend its lifespan if it were a little more open to play.

VERDICT 6/10
AN ENTERTAINING CO-OP, BRAINS NOT REQUIRED



Above: Environmental hazards can do much of the heavy lifting for you when it comes to taking out swarms of zombies. Most take the form of gas canisters, but occasionally you'll be able to trigger more impressive traps.



A LOT OF FUZZ ABOUT NOTHING

LA Cops

It's immediately apparent which game inspired *LA Cops* the moment you start playing it. It may sport an isometric viewpoint and polygonal characters rather than its muse's top-down sprite-based visuals, but this is clearly a *Hotline Miami* follower, albeit one in which this time the player is on the other side of the law.

It isn't a direct lift, however: it does try to mix things up by introducing some new mechanics, most notably the need to control two police officers at once. In theory this means you'll be methodically making your way through buildings with both cops – sometimes issuing "go there" commands to your CPU-controller partner, other times switching control to them entirely – but in practice it's more irritation than innovation.

Your partner's AI is far too inconsistent to allow for any real degree of tactical planning. When you send them to the next enemy-filled room with the intent of backing them up, it's impossible to tell how they're going to act, meaning most of the time you'll be adjusting your plan depending on your partner's actions rather than the enemy's.

Because of this, you'll find yourself ditching the game's recommended two-cop approach and going it alone instead, leaving your partner at the start of the stage and treating them as an extra life in case you're shot. Oddly, this even makes for better scores, as the game gives you a higher rank for the more arrests you make, and this is infinitely easier when you don't have a partner shooting the bad guys before you can reach them and slap on the cuffs.

Controls feel a little unwieldy regardless of whether you're playing with keyboard and mouse or a controller. The latter allows for more satisfying twin-stick controls, but both options feel too slippery, as if every floor surface in the game has been waxed.

Engaging enemies in shootouts can also be a temperamental affair. Sometimes you'll only require a couple of shots to take out a criminal, other times you'll pump five or six bullets into him before he falls. The criteria that decides which is which has been seemingly lost to the cosmos, because it seemingly isn't detailed in the game.

The infuriating thing is that despite these issues, when things come together it's actually very satisfying taking your solo cop (forget your partner) through each room and gunning down oodles of enemies: it's not unlike a 'good guy' version of the scene in *The Terminator* when Arnie is taking out all the cops.

It's just a shame that these moments of exhilaration are interrupted by niggles that will constantly have you saying "Well, *Hotline Miami* wouldn't do that". In that respect, then, it isn't so similar after all.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Modern Dream
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GB RAM, i3 processor, NVIDIA GeForce 9500 GT
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: Each of the six playable officers has their own speed, health, ammo and firepower stats. They can be levelled up to high degrees: as a result the game can become too easy fairly quickly.

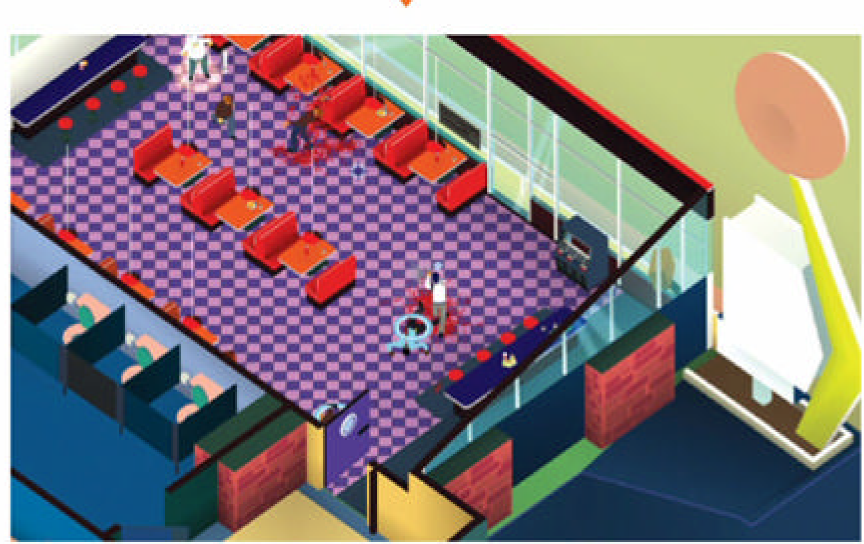


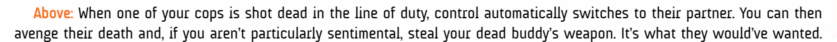
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ADD CO-OP: If it wants us to use two cops, let us have the other one controlled by another player.
THE PLOT: The cut scenes aren't very funny, the voice acting is bland and some strands end nowhere.

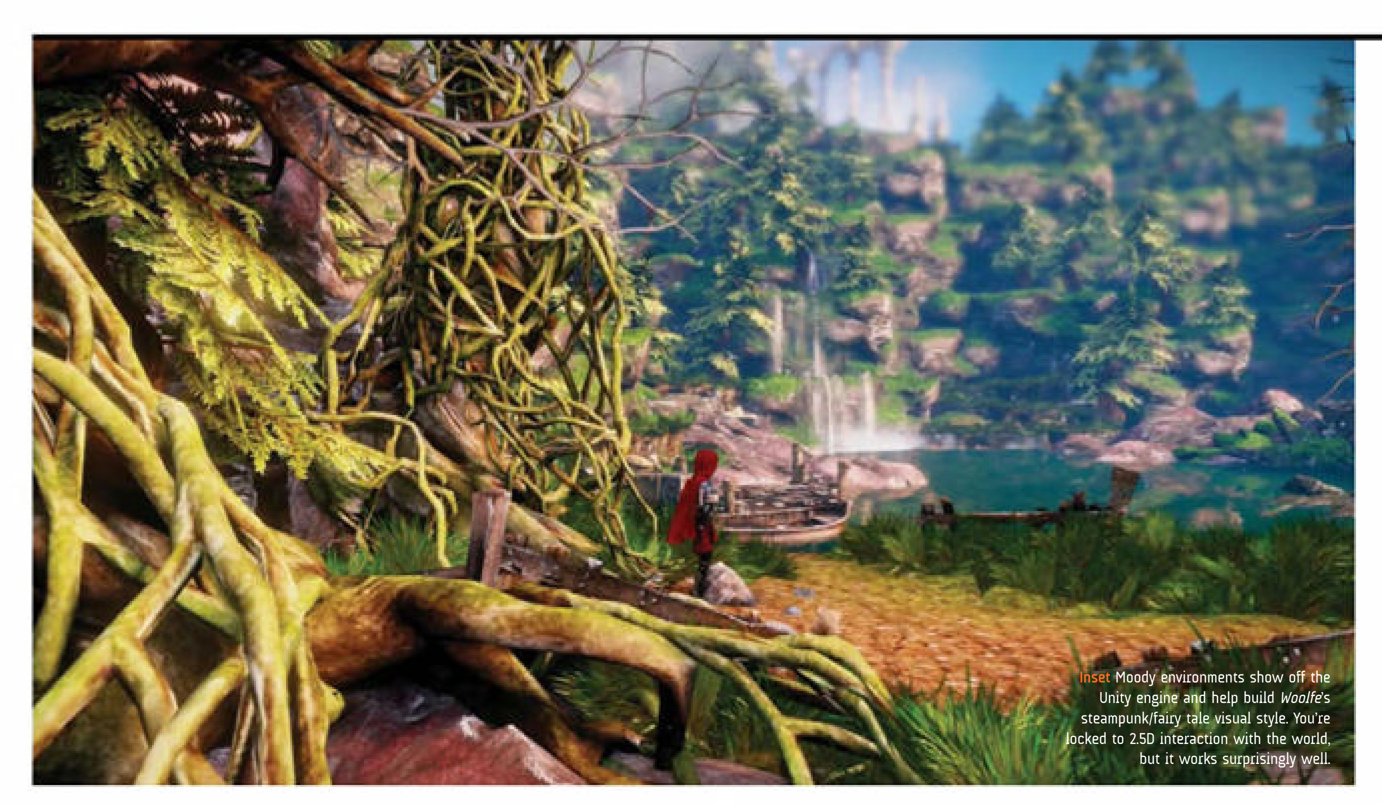
VERDICT 4/10
A DISAPPOINTING GAME WITH A FLAWED CENTRAL MECHANIC





Above: When one of your cops is shot dead in the line of duty, control automatically switches to their partner. You can then avenge their death and, if you aren't particularly sentimental, steal your dead buddy's weapon. It's what they would've wanted.





Inset Moody environments show off the Unity engine and help build *Woolfe*'s steampunk/fairy tale visual style. You're locked to 2.5D interaction with the world, but it works surprisingly well.

NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries

Darker takes on fairy tales may be en vogue at the minute, thanks to the likes of *Once Upon a Time* and *Grimm* on TV, but in games they're nothing new. *American McGee's Alice* came out in 2000, for instance, making it potentially older than some of you reading this. Belgian developer GriN's *Woolfe* has precedence in the medium.

There are some flourishes in its take, like the almost pulp noir vibe, as this vengeance-fuelled teen assassin version of Red investigates the deaths of her parents. Similarly, the recasting of the big, bad wolf as corrupt, sadistic business mogul B.B. Woolfe works well, allowing for some veiled commentary on corporate malfeasance.

Despite these few twists on narrative formula, there's no such innovation to be found in gameplay. Everything is serviceable, but there's nothing you won't have seen elsewhere. Red's blend of stealth, acrobatics, and hack/slash attacks hold no surprises, nor do scripted chase sections where you flee enemies. Although a few power-up moves automatically unlock as you progress, gifting her with ground-slam and axe-throwing techniques amongst others, these too feel overly familiar and do little to elevate combat. Hammering the basic and heavy attack buttons to shred the sinister tin soldiers that police Woolfe's domain will get you through most encounters. Even boss fights feel "been there, done that". A giant rat in the sewers, summoned by an implied paedophilic Pied Piper, is bested with a yawn-inducing "dodge-avoid-activate switch" pattern, which was definitely in at least 12 games in the last week alone.

Still, it looks rather lovely; somewhere between a Candy Kingdom Christmas card and Gothic nightmare, depending on the section. It's one of the better implementations of 2.5D aesthetics, with Red running in and out of fixed environments, occasionally in a race against the clock as some timed environmental puzzle demands you memorise layout and speedrun through.

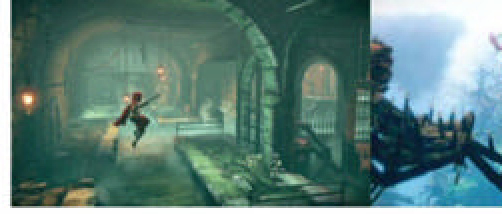
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Belgium
PUBLISHER: GriN
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7/ Intel i5 2x 2.6 GHz, or AMD equivalent/3GB RAM/Nvidia GT 640 or AMD Radeon HD 6870/7750/3GB HDD space



BETTER THAN: BLADE KITTEN

WORSE THAN: NEVER ALONE: KISIMA INGITCHUNA



SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

NOIRY TALES: Red's narration detailing the corrupt world is a highlight, improving on rote "dark fable" storytelling you might otherwise have seen from a game based on such a well-known tale.

Weirdly though, for something with such strong European origins, all voiceover work is American. It's more distracting than you'd think, particularly when uniquely US terminology makes its way into the script; like the Pied Piper being referred to as a "jock".

Woolfe is short too, but *Volume 2* will land in August, which accounts for the brevity, and its low price softens the blow further. Considering the minimal financial investment, this is a fine effort really: you'll be briefly entertained, and there's nothing too bad about the game. There's just nothing that's especially worth singing the praises of either.



VERDICT 5/10

AMBITIOUS BUT FLAWED – WHAT BIG EYES GRIN HAD

KILL OR BE KILLED

Shelter 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac OS
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Might And Delight
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



A spiritual sequel to 2013's best badger simulator isn't what we'd necessarily refer to in the industry as a 'sure thing'. *Shelter* was an interesting, though entirely unconvincing, attempt to utilise the interactive form to deliver a different type of game. While the idea was solid – tasking you with simulating the lifecycle of a badger in a papercraft world – the execution was lacklustre, restrained by a lack of freedom, depth and ambition. We sure were interested to see whether developer Might And Delight could appropriately expand on the core concept in an impactful manner.

Sadly, *Shelter 2* expands upon almost everything over its first iteration, except its ambition. It's a shame, because on the surface, *Shelter 2* seems to include everything it needs to deliver. The stunning art direction and atmospheric music remains largely unchanged; the grassy corridor has been replaced by an impressively-sized world; and, more importantly, you've moved up in the food chain as you embody an adorable momma Lynx.

That's an important distinction; a Lynx is both predator or prey, after all. A few new simple yet functional mechanics have come into play as you attempt to defend, feed and nurture both yourself and four adorable baby cubs. There's a button to run, one to roar, one to sense and another to attack – welcome additions while trying to survive the wilderness. It's here where you get the impression that *Shelter 2* will soar past its predecessor, allowing you appropriately embody the powerful bobcat and fend for your family, but a lack of mechanical depth ends up being a detriment to the entire experience.

All you're doing in *Shelter 2* is walking and eating. And occasionally watching in horror as one of your cubs is savaged by a wolf. But mostly it's just the walking and eating thing. This will happen for an hour, and then the game will end. Replayability is hampered by a severe lack of consistent interest. There will be long periods where there is no prey to track or hunt, instead you're left to ramble on until the whining of your cubs drives you insane. An accurate representation of life in the animal kingdom? Perhaps. But is it an engaging experience? Absolutely not. Worse still, when you do eventually come across prey there's no targeting system, nor any obvious way to stalk. Instead you're forced to waste what little stamina you have chasing down fast prey, a frustrating reality when the environment presents so many wasted or otherwise underdeveloped opportunities to better replicate the hunt-or-be-hunted gameplay cycle.

The problems of the original *Shelter* remain, albeit in a bigger and more complex world. There's nothing particularly bad in *Shelter 2*, but it's just wholly mediocre. A sequel that offers glimpses of growth that are quickly tempered by a lack of execution. It feels like a wasted opportunity.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BEAUTIFUL VIEW: The papercraft art style looks incredible, and sets *Shelter 2* away from the pack of indie titles on Steam. There really isn't anything around that looks quite like this.



Above: Shelter 2 has a beautiful and expansive world to explore, but there's a disappointingly minimal amount of things to hold your interest over the hour of playtime. Sadly, there also isn't a great deal of replayability either.



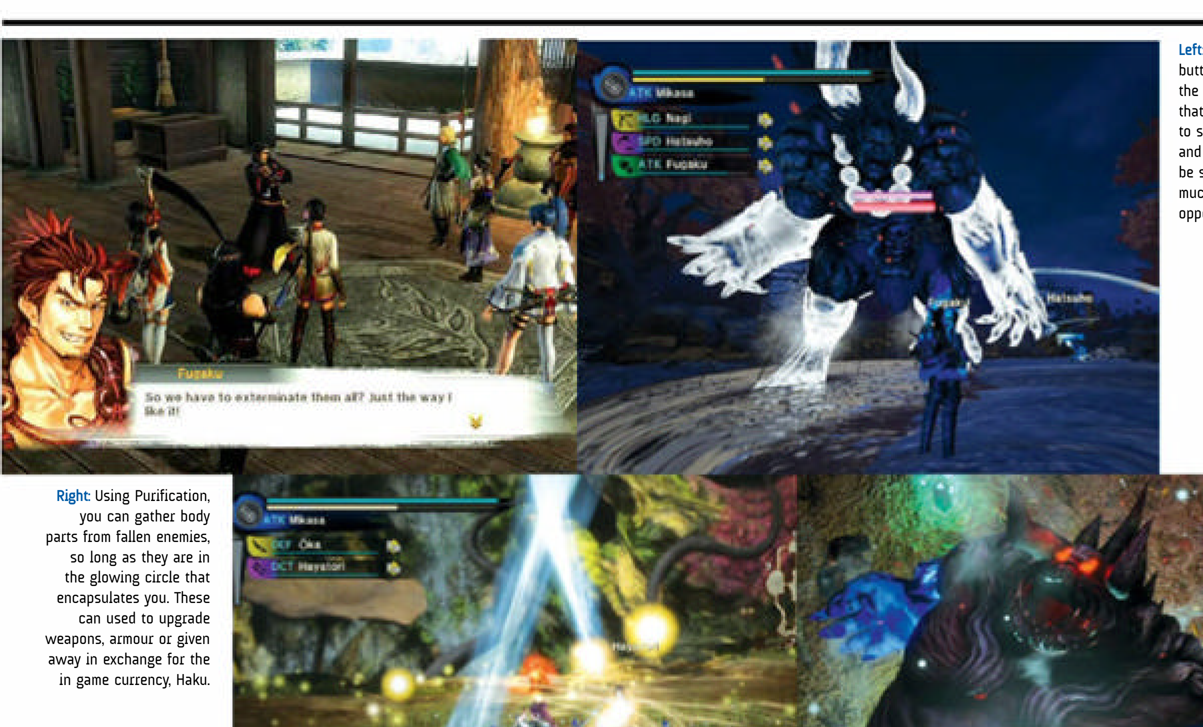


Above: Taking control of a Lynx is far more entertaining than the badger from the original release, especially as it's half-way up the food chain. You'll not only need to hunt live prey, but do your best to avoid deadly wolves that roam the forests.



VERDICT 5/10

BEAUTIFUL, BUT FAILS TO CAPITALISE ON ITS POTENTIAL



Left: Pressing the Options button allows you to use the Eye of Truth, a skill that gives you the power to see both materials and Oni that can't usually be seen, as well as how much life/shield your opponent has left.

Right: Using Purification, you can gather body parts from fallen enemies, so long as they are in the glowing circle that encapsulates you. These can used to upgrade weapons, armour or given away in exchange for the in game currency, Haku.

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

Toukiden: Kiwami

With Nintendo currently holding a firm grip on the *Monster Hunter* series, those without a Nintendo console must surely feel left out, especially with the lack of beast-laden titles on the other current-gen boxes. *Toukiden: Kiwami* is looking to change that, giving fans of the aforementioned series something unique, yet obviously *MH* influenced to sink your teeth into. The sequel to last year's Vita title, *Toukiden: The Age Of Demons*, *Kiwami* isn't perfect but it *is* enjoyable.

Comprising of the first seven 'Age of Demons chapters, the *Kiwami* content starts with chapter eight. Taking on the role of your own, customisable Slayer throughout, the game is based in the village of Utakata, where you and your fellow Slayers are one of the last lines of defence in the war against the Oni, aka demons, who have infiltrated the human world in a bid to destroy it. Told via cutscenes and character interaction, the story feels more like a backdrop for the action rather than an in-depth tale, but does have a few intriguing twists. Character-wise, some are more likeable than others, seeing your bonds flourish with those you do care about being an enjoyable facet of the game.

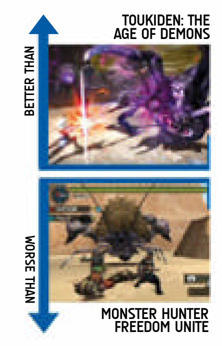
Out on the battlefields, known as Ages, main mission objectives and variants differ, with additional types of missions being added to *Kiwami*. With demon-slaying being the continual method towards goal accomplishment, gameplay feels a little repetitive, but that doesn't stop battles, especially with the more difficult monsters, from being bouts of joyful chaos. A mixture of button-mashing and careful planning, the AI in the game is particularity fantastic, your fellow comrades never failing to join in on a Unity attack or help you when in need.

Once you and your Slayer buddies have defeated a certain large Oni, they will release a trapped soul, souls which you can gather and whose power you can harness into your weapon for boosts/skills. Known as Mitamas, there are lots more of these to capture in *Kiwami*, though these additions don't bring as much variety as you'd hope. The game also has side quests, which involve you collecting items for villagers and friends, while an online, multi-player option brings new missions to sink your teeth into. Like *Age Of Demons*, this is really where *Kiwami*'s strength lies, especially if you have a group of dedicated hunters in your midst. With gameplay comprising of multiple phases, having real life players to plan and attack your enemies with gives you a whole different sense of bloody and co-operative satisfaction.

If you have a PS4, want to kill monsters and have fun while doing it, look no further. If you want long battles and expansive landscapes, look somewhere else.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE, MORE, MORE: There's lots of fresh content and rewards for both first-time and familiar players.
GRAPHICAL UPDATE: From the beasts to the backgrounds, *Kiwami* looks great on the PS4.



ALTERNATIVE ADVENTURE FOR THOSE WHO LIKE TO HUNT



Left: The quality of *Chapters*' writing and voice acting varies wildly, veering from the naturalistic and relatable to stilted and cliché. The game's Arcadia sections arguable suffer the most due to a tendency to fall back on fantasy tropes.

HAUNTED BY THE NIGHTMARES OF ITS PAST

Dreamfall Chapters: Book Two – Rebels

Have you ever played a game that has a not insignificant list of problems, but you felt compelled to recommend it anyway? A game that, despite all its obvious failings and inconsistences, has qualities that makes you want to forgive the things it does wrong? The second instalment of *Dreamfall Chapters* is that kind of game.

One of the key problems here is one that we thought had been worked out in *Chapters*' first instalment. *Book One* struggled with the fact that its audience was divided between long-time fans of the *Dreamfall* series and newcomers, but that became less of an issue as the game progressed and we got to spend more time with Zoë Castillo in the dystopic sci-fi future world of Stark.

In *Book Two*, however, *Dreamfall* undertakes the task of properly introducing us to its second protagonist, who had only a small role in *Book One*, Kian Alvane. In the process of doing that, the problems that *Book One* had introducing us to Zoë re-emerge. We meet characters that Kian has clearly encountered in the past, but that we as players may not have; we get references to past events that are evidently important, but that remain opaque to anyone who hasn't experienced them for themselves. As a result, there are times when you can feel like you have an incomplete understanding of Kian and end up making choices without the necessary context to inform them.

Outside of those narrative troubles, *Chapters* also has one or two technical issues, including a bug that forced us to reboot the game on a couple of occasions. The game's most pressing problem, though, is a lighting system that frequently has the effect of making character's eyes glow and pulse like the shining beacon of a lighthouse – distracting when you're trying to listen to dialogue, to say the least.

Yet, despite all this, *Dreamfall* still gets its hooks in. That's not least in part to the time you get to spend in the wonderfully well drawn world of Stark. The story of political conflict between the racist, reactionary European Dawn and liberal democratic Unity Party set up in *Book One* takes a very interesting turn, tackling themes of ideological homogenisation and corporate influence. *Dreamfall*'s ever more sophisticated attempts to reflect our political culture within the windows of its dark dystopian spires is far more nuanced, and by extension, far more engaging, than is generally the case in videogames.

Sure, *Chapters* might be technically temperamental and occasionally get itself tangled in the threads of the series' narrative, but it is also intelligent, crafts its world skilfully and has an admirable commitment to themes and design principles that make it stand out. We're left eager to see where it goes next.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Norway
PUBLISHER: Red Thread
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £23.99 (Season)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows 7, Processor: Core 2 Duo 2GHz or equivalent, Memory: 3 GB RAM, Graphics: Intel HD Graphics 4000, Hard Drive: 5GB available space

AS GOOD AS: LIFE IS STRANGE



WORSE THAN: THE WALKING DEAD

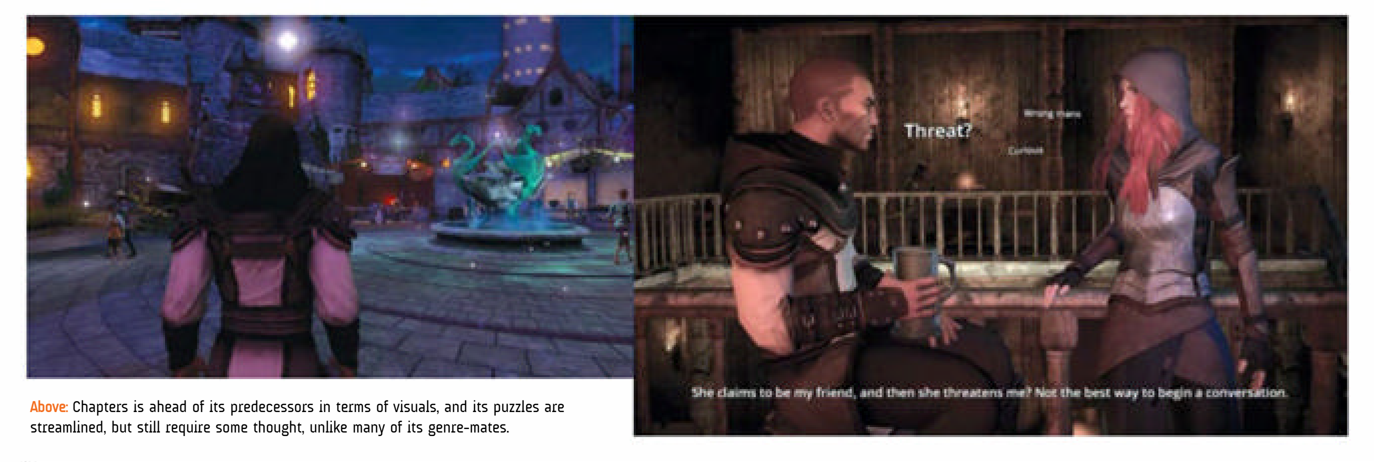
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LEFT HERE?: The lack of a mini-map or some kind of other navigational pointer can be frustrating at first, but *Dreamfall* reminds us of the value of being forced to really get to *know* a place.

VERDICT 7/10

NOT WITHOUT ITS PROBLEMS, BUT STILL COMPELLING



Above: Chapters is ahead of its predecessors in terms of visuals, and its puzzles are streamlined, but still require some thought, unlike many of its genre-mates.

Below: The game's use of photographic artefacts and exposure flares as a technique is pretty and unique, and helps *Life Is Strange* find graphical nuance very well suited to episodic gaming.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: DONTNOD Entertainment
PRICE: £13.99 (Season Pass)
RELEASE: Out now
GENRE: Adventure
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
LIFE IS STRANGE, EPISODE 1: CHRYSALIS



AS GOOD AS
THE WALKING DEAD, SEASON ONE

NO EMOJI

Life Is Strange, Episode 2: Out Of Time

The Japanese language has a phrase – 'mono no aware' – that refers to the feeling you get when you realise every moment is fleeting. *Life Is Strange* is all about that feeling, using time and photographs as recurring motifs.

In the first episode, we were uncertain whether *Life Is Strange* would have the legs to move on through five episodes. Now, after playing through the second instalment of Dontnod's newest project, we're hooked. It's the best episodic game we've played, and that's because it plays with what an episodic game actually is.

Let's rewind. You play as Max, a self-depricating teenager in college. You've witnessed some pretty weird stuff going on: you've managed to crawl into a wormhole and see your town get destroyed. But then you woke up, and now have the power to mess with time. In a game that's all about moral choices and over-thinking every interaction you have, that's massive.

But it's the moments where Max is all self-aware, written in a way that only a teenager can be written, that stood out to us. Max's relationship with Chloe is dealt with better than any other game we can think of concerning teenage girls. There's a gravity to it all. *Life Is Strange* feels like a story that's been lived before. It gets a good look at the dirt under the fingernails of suburban life.

Out Of Time features the first big divergence in the game's construction. We won't say what, but from one pivotal scene in-game, it's clear that *Life Is Strange* is a lot braver than we initially gave it credit for. It's not scared of exploring some really deep, really serious issues.

We thought this game was just trying to riff on the likes of *The Butterfly Effect* and *Donnie Darko*, but we were wrong. It supersedes them, it takes the elements that made those movies interesting and dissects them, giving the powers to you, so that you want to learn more…

…But you're scared to. After all, how can one girl in time affect everything around her? There's a butterfly motif to the game that spreads a lot deeper than it appears. Think about it – at the very start of the first game, you saved Chloe's life, and you do it again in *Episode 2*. Something in the universe wants her dead and you're the buffer zone.

Life Is Strange does everything *Donnie Darko* did with film, but in a game. It's a smart game that's essential for anyone who thinks they can see through the mechanics of other episodic, choice-based games. We thought we could, and *Life Is Strange* slapped us in the face.

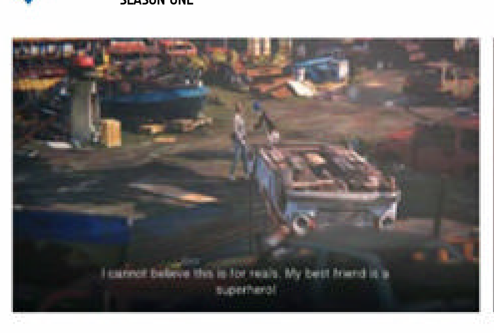
FINGERPRINT

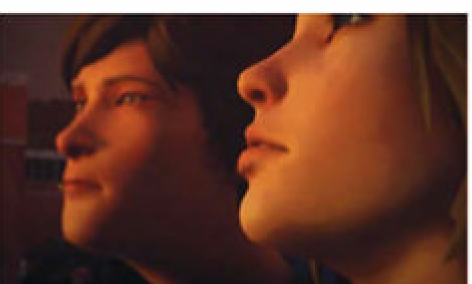
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

A THEORY OF EVERYTHING: By being able to bend time, time itself becomes meaningless to Max, in a way, and the way that's communicated in game makes you understand your confused teen avatar.



VERDICT 9/10
THE MOST INTRIGUING EPISODIC WE'VE PLAYED TO DATE







WHY I ❤...

SID MEIER'S SIMGOLF

IAN MILHAM, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, VISCERAL GAMES

"I played the hell out of Sid Meier's SimGolf. *Here's why: underneath the golf veneer, it was a game about game design – you laid out golf courses, and created little rewards for your little sims that would play your golf course, and it was illustrative of what making a game is actually like. There's never any actual danger, or frustration, in there, because that's not fun, right? But if you could portray the* impression *of danger to people, and made them feel like they've really gotten away from something… that's the goal. It's not like I didn't know that before, but* SimGolf *made it surprisingly compelling to the extent where it took over our office for a couple of months because it felt like what we were doing every day was distilled into a smaller, more condensed form. That's my left-field influential title!"*



> "It was so influential to me that I would drive 25 miles from my house, go to this cool videogames studio and pick up a game"

IAN MILHAM, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, VISCERAL GAMES

RETRO



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum www.gamestm.co.uk/forum

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... THE AVENGERS



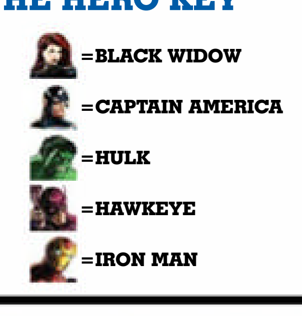
Marvel's super-powered all-star team has predictably had more than its fair share of exposure in gaming. If you're looking to brush up on your history ready for Age Of Ultron, here are the games to play and the ones to avoid

IT'S A KNOWN problem across all of gaming, but superheroes are notoriously hard to get right in interactive form. Offer players too much power and it's impossible to present a satisfying challenge, but offer too little and you fundamentally miss the point of playing as a superhero.

Only a handful of releases have genuinely managed to strike this delicate balance in 30+ years of trying, but those that did stand as perfect examples of just how much fun daft costumes and over-the-top abilities can be when the developer gets everything right.

Presented here is three decades' worth of *Avengers* gaming goodness (and badness), broken down by which of the current Hollywood roster made appearances. No prizes for guessing which hero has had the most starring roles (spoilers: it isn't Hawkeye)…

THE HERO KEY



=BLACK WIDOW

=CAPTAIN AMERICA

=HULK

=HAWKEYE

=IRON MAN



=QUICKSILVER

=SCARLET WITCH

=THOR

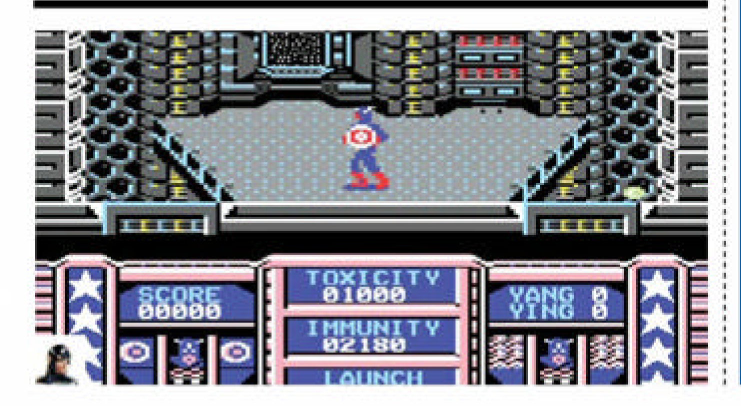
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QUESTPROBE FEATURING THE HULK 1984

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

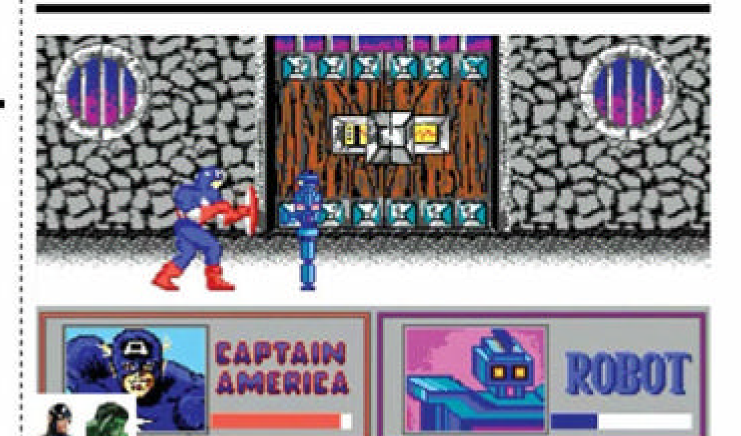
What better way to celebrate one of the most action-centric superhero characters of them all but with the tame pace of a classic text adventure? Sure, the format might not have made sense, but at least the extremely limited vocabulary of the game (anything more than a two-word command would not be recognised) was accidentally in keeping with the character. *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four* versions followed with greatly improved commands.



CAPTAIN AMERICA IN: THE DOOM TUBE OF DR. MEGALOMANN 1987

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Spider-Man and Superman both got no-nonsense titles on the Atari 2600, but Captain America wasn't quite so lucky with his oddly titled gaming debut. It's about as good a game as the title suggests, sadly, and it's hardly surprising that it's even more obtuse and offensive on the eyes and ears nearly 30 years later. As with the simple language of Hulk's debut, though, would there have been anything more fitting for Rogers than a game out of time such as this?



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN AND CAPTAIN AMERICA IN DOCTOR DOOM'S REVENGE 1989

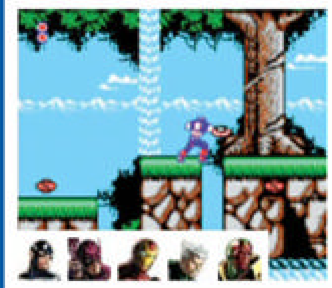
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Frozen underwater for years and now two awful games on the trot – poor Cap just couldn't catch a break. Play alternates between him and Spidey, although there's little reason for it to do so beyond getting both names on the box. Single-screen challenges range from horrible battles to mobility 'puzzles', though the game is notable for having perhaps the only Rhino boss battle in history that doesn't involve baiting him into running into a wall and hitting him while he's stunned. Somehow, this is even worse.

CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE AVENGERS 1991

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The first title to carry the actual name of Marvel's heroic ensemble actually only brought together four of its members as playable characters – Captain America, Hawkeye, Vision and Iron Man – in a side-scrolling action game already outclassed by the likes of *Golden Axe* and Konami's *Turtles* effort on release. Still, the chance to dish out comic-style onomatopunishment was welcomed by fans all the same, but it would be bettered by Konami's *X-Men* brawler within a year. Welcome to die, indeed.

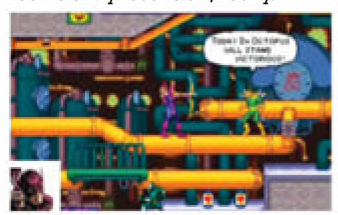




SPIDER-MAN: THE VIDEO GAME 1991

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Developers quickly realised that leveraging more of the Marvel cast could bring in even more money, so while this 'classic' scrolling fighter only carries the web-slinger's name, it also features Hawkeye, Black Cat and Sub-Mariner as playable characters, your hero of choice tied to which slot you drop credits into. Not that it really paints Hawkeye in a great light – if your one power is archery, making arrows go more than ten feet is entry-level stuff, really.





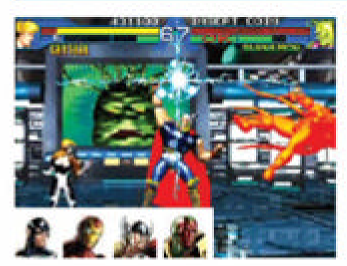
THE INCREDIBLE HULK 1993

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

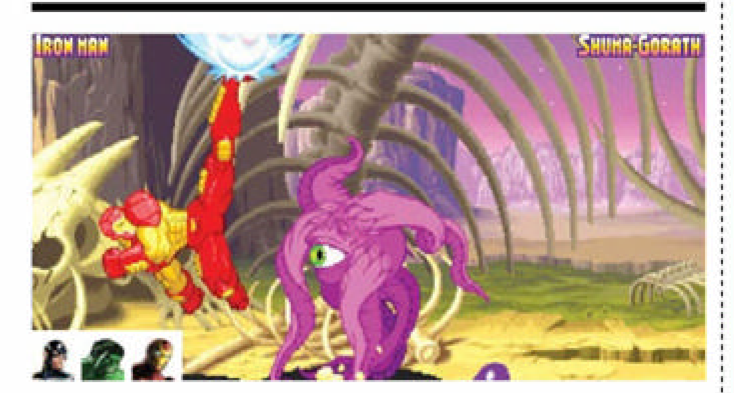
No text prompts this time – Hulk got as authentic an outing as 16-bit hardware would allow here, and a game that fit well on the relatively new home consoles. In the same vein as *Gods* and other such games of the era, it combined simple combat and platforming into one somewhat satisfying experience. Nice little flourishes, such as the ability to toss smaller enemies aside, really helped hammer home Hulk's ridiculous strength.

AVENGERS IN GALACTIC STORM 1995

SYSTEM: ARCADE



This one-on-one fighter used a similar rendered 3D character model to *Killer Instinct*, and it holds up just as poorly as a result. Just four playable characters make the cut (Cap joined by Black Knight, Crystal and Thunderstrike) with four more added as Assists, a feature that would soon go on to be a staple in the Marvel fighter universe.



MARVEL SUPER HEROES 1995

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

We'd love to know whether it was Marvel who went to Capcom to try and cash in on the success of *Street Fighter II* or Capcom who took the idea of a superhero fighter to Marvel in an attempt to branch out, but either way, it's a perfect fit. Throwing a handful of heroes and villains from the Infinity Gauntlet arc together, this managed to blend Capcom's fighting expertise and Marvel's character design to create something truly special, and something that would only get even better in the coming years…

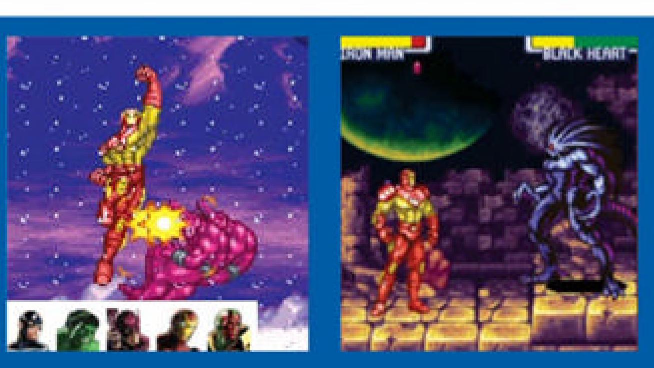
THE INCREDIBLE HULK: THE PANTHEON SAGA 1996

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

While there were a few gems to be found in near-perfect arcade ports and first-party showpieces, the early days of the 32-bit generation really aren't pretty to look back on for the most part. This abysmal excuse for a game is best forgotten, and only made worse by the fact that the box has the word 'incredible' on it. Lies, all of it. Never mind when he's angry – we just don't like him at all, if this is anything to go by.



ONE OF THE MAIN PROBLEMS WITH THE AVENGERS WILL ALWAYS BE BALANCING THEIR DIFFERENT STYLES AND CHARACTERISTICS



MARVEL SUPER HEROES IN WAR OF THE GEMS 1996

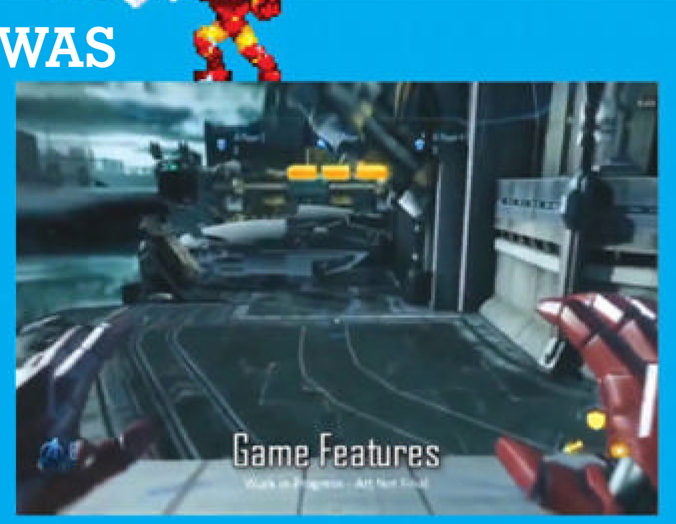
SYSTEM: SNES

One of the main problems with the Avengers will always be balancing their different styles and characteristics to make them work in a game. Basic scrolling fighter archetypes here lead to Iron Man being slow despite actually being rocket-propelled (still, at least he has a double jump… wait, what?), Spider-Man a weakling and Cap being distinctly average. Far from the best example of the genre, and largely due to the dev's inability to work outside of brawler conventions to give these guys a fair crack.

THE GAME THAT NEVER WAS

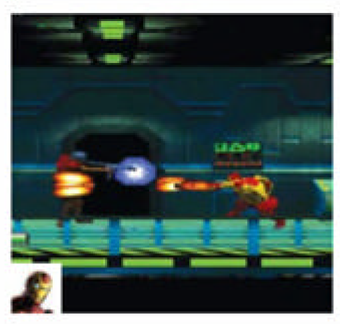
How THQ pulled the plug on the best Avengers game

Whether you like the movie or not, the fact remains that Marvel's ensemble cast deserves a better gaming outing than *Battle For Earth*. THQ was in the process of readying just such a game when it was taken by Tak's great Juju power, and the plug was pulled before the game could be finished. While it didn't look amazing in the early leaked footage, it certainly showed potential – individual characters had their own move sets and the potential for a *Left 4 Dead*-style co-op experience was evident even at that early stage. Sadly, the project would have taken significant amounts of both time and money to fully develop – both commodities THQ unfortunately didn't have in its twilight hours. First-person play was looking interesting across all characters, even if it would most likely have taken a few years to iterate on and get right. Balancing the skills of Cap and Hulk in a first-person game is a task so tough that we wouldn't wish it on our worst enemies, so we can't say that we're surprised that this project died – we're just disappointed.



IRON MAN/X-O MANOWAR IN HEAVY METAL 1996

SYSTEM: VARIOUS



Acclaim picked up Valiant Comics for a cool $65 million in 1996 and used this generic brawler as a way for the publishing house's relatively unknown hero to share some screen time with a big Marvel name. Like with Hulk's early PS1 outing, this proved to be an anachronism in an age where 3D was becoming king, and proof that marketing a character as a pure palette swap of a more familiar hero isn't the best way to sell a 'new' superhero.

MARVEL SUPER HEROES VS STREET FIGHTER 1997

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

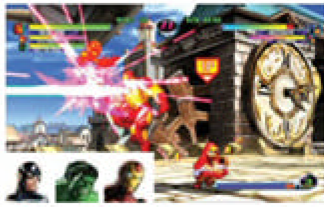
Following on from the success of its Marvel fighter, Capcom saw fit to pit comic books' finest against its own band of world warriors, leading to the birth of the crossover fighter as we know it today. Unlike most other competitive fighters, this is completely about spectacle and variety rather than purity and balance, a sentiment that MVC reflects to this day. It may not be a fair fight, but you can be damn sure that it's going to be an awesome one.

MARVEL VS CAPCOM: CLASH OF SUPER HEROES 1998

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Why stop at *Street Fighter*? Why not let the entirety of Capcom's stable have a crack at the most powerful heroes in Comictown? The likes of Mega Man and Strider joining the mix, as well as the roster opening up on the Marvel side and tag team gameplay being added only helped grow that emphasis on spectacle, with attacks on both sides made bigger and better. The Dreamcast conversion was superb, but even the PlayStation port found clever ways to work around hardware shortcomings.





MARVEL VS CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES 2000

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

If you can read the game's title without having 'gonna take you for a ride' sung at you in your head, then you're one of the lucky ones. *MvC2* championed roster size over all else (hence why competitive play is effectively limited to six or seven characters) but again, as a fighter of bombast and spectacle, you'll still struggle to find its equal to this day. No, you really will – licensing issues mean it recently got pulled from XBLA and PSN. Let's fire up that Dreamcast…



THE INVINCIBLE IRON MAN 2002

SYSTEM: Game Boy Advance

Stealing one suit of super armour from a guy who has loads seems like the worst plan going, but then that's probably why the bad guys always lose. While nothing special – the likes of *Astro Boy* and *Gunstar Super Heroes* would soon show it up – *Invincible* proved a solid superhero shooter that actually managed to get the core tenets of the hero showcased correct. If only its home console peers had been able to follow suit.



TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

It comes to something when one of the most satisfying ways to pretend to be Iron Man is with a skateboard taped to you at all times. Neversoft were no strangers to guest characters and many Marvel names popped up in its skating titles over the years, and at a time when pretty much all licensed games were trash, it was little slices of genius such as this that kept our inner true believers sane.





HULK 2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

We shouldn't even have to say anything about this – it's a movie licence from the turn of the millennium, and that's all you really need to know about it. All the stops were firmly left in when creating this forgettable tie-in – the fact that they actually managed to get Eric Bana on board for voice work is effectively the only thing going for a game that would otherwise have dissolved in bargain bins several years ago. Actually, no – that's exactly what happened anyway.





X-MEN LEGENDS 2: RISE OF APOCALYPSE 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

As the title suggests, the focus here was primarily on X-Men heroes and villains, although the team clearly wanted to open things up a lot more for the sequel. As such, the action-RPG featured several Avengers stalwarts as unlockable characters (alongside a bunch of other, significantly less famous Marvel names as NPCs and bosses) and set the stage for *Ultimate Alliance* a mere 12 months later.



THE INCREDIBLE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Finally, a game that actually gets Hulk right. Huge attacks, soaring leaps and ground pounds that level entire city blocks are the cornerstones of this somewhat unsung classic, although the team behind it would also go on to turning the same blend of open-world chaos into a new IP with the largely underrated Prototype series. It's not clever, but it sure as hell is big – tell us they didn't learn *that* from the Hulk himself.

MARVEL NEMESIS: RISE OF THE IMPERFECTS 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

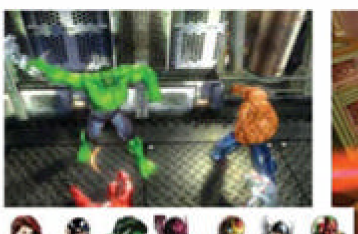


Flawed on every level from inception to execution, *Rise Of The Imperfects* is one of the worst games we've ever played. Stars like Iron Man and Spider-Man rub shoulders with purpose-built newcomers such as Johnny Ohm and Hazmat in this fundamentally unbalanced arena brawler – a game we hope to never have to play again in this lifetime.

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Lessons were clearly learned from the second X-Men action-RPG and the first follow-up to arrive was even more lenient with its dress code. Most Avengers mainstays showed their faces, even if not in playable form, and the game's success would mean that the inevitable sequel would be able to take things a step further still…





LITTLEBIGPLANET 2008

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 3

Sackboy isn't a Marvel character, nor an Avenger (though we'd pay to see that movie) but he is a woven dummy on which any outfit could look good. Over the years, most of the Avengers heroes have made their way into *LBP* in costume form, with the community using this as an excuse to create Marvel-themed levels and movie shorts as a result. Expect even more after *Age Of Ultron* smashes yet more records.





IRON MAN 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

We're not entirely sure how an origin story about a man making a mech suit from junk he found in a cave ever actually became a videogame, but it did. Cue a bunch of very boring and very brown missions that did little to help the gaming renown of one of Marvel's most colourful and charismatic heroes, and instead just further helped cement the notion that all licensed games were junk. Not exactly Sega's finest hour.

THE INCREDIBLE HULK 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

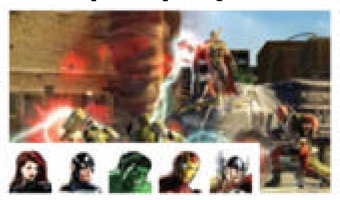


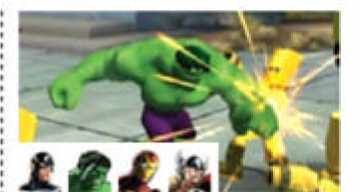
Come on, Sega – you're better than this. Getting the whole movie cast on board is something of a coup in this day and age, but you're probably going to want something to back that up gameplay-wise. A hangover from the previous generation's reliance on licence strength over game quality, this isn't exactly the green guy's finest hour…

MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 2 2009

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The idea of getting the whole team together is taken to the next level in this sequel which, despite being rooted in the Marvel Civil War storyline, takes just enough liberties with its source material to allow fans in either camp to build their perfect team of heroes. Not all can be recruited – some only appear as bosses if you go down the narrative path they disagree with.



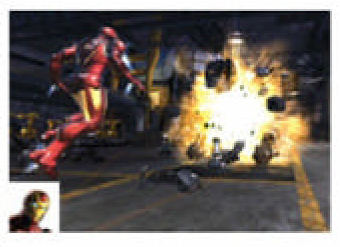


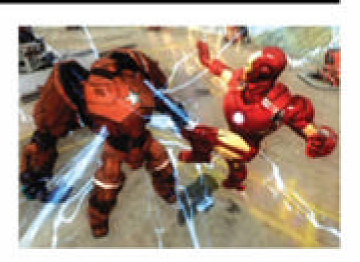
MARVEL SUPER HERO SQUAD 2009

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Wii's insane install base was always going to be a target for a lot of cash-hungry teams and what better leverage to use than Marvel's bank of heroes? Super-deformed versions of classic characters and a simplified story made this a perfect fit in theory, but the game simply didn't hold up – too simple and too shallow to be much fun, it simply didn't do any of the heroes featured justice.

FLAWED ON EVERY LEVEL FROM INCEPTION TO EXECUTION, RISE OF THE IMPERFECTS IS ONE OF THE WORST GAMES WE'VE EVER PLAYED





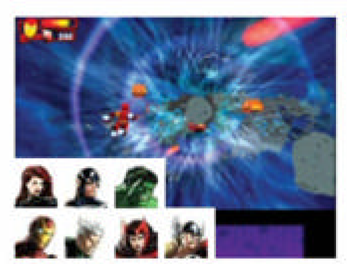
IRON MAN 2 2010

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Another dodgy movie tie-in, and one not helped by the fact that the film it was based on was pretty poor to begin with. Iron Man and War Machine are effectively interchangeable here, and neither is as much fun to zoom around blasting stuff with as they should be. Remember that scene in the movie where Tony suits up while drunk? Yeah, this is the gaming equivalent of that mess.

MARVEL SUPER HERO SQUAD: THE INFINITY GAUNTLET 2010

SYSTEM: VARIOUS



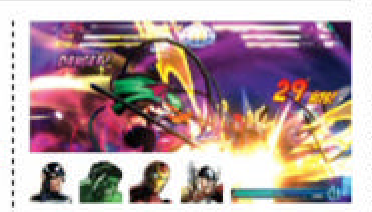
THQ churned these out in an effort to stay afloat, and this is the best of a bad bunch. It looks to emulate the format of the *Lego* games, but fails on almost all fronts – it's short, flat, dull and humourless, meaning there's little even for the younger demographic it's aimed at. Just stick with *Lego Marvel*, or wait for *Lego Avengers* later this year.

MARVEL SUPER HERO SQUAD: COMIC COMBAT 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

We can't imagine that 'adding uDraw Tablet support' rates particularly highly on the big list of Ways To Improve A Mediocre-At-Best Game, but that's what THQ tried here. Guess how it went? Go on, guess. Yes! That's absolutely right! It was a disaster! uDraw will sleep for eternity in the bunk below the N-Gage in the Dorm Of Shattered Dreams, but at least it will have thousands of unsold copies of this rubbish to keep it company for eternity.





MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3: FATE OF TWO WORLDS 2011

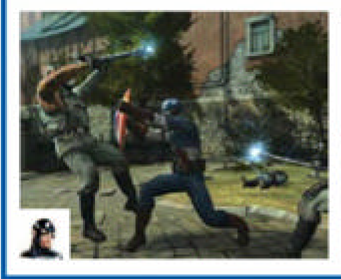
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

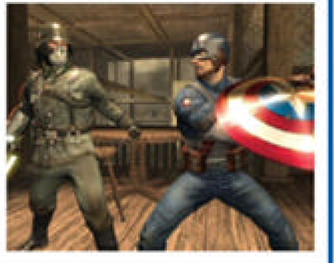
Ah, now this is more like it. Understanding that the fighting genre was one where stupidly overpowered characters could flourish rather than struggle was a masterstroke on Capcom's part – it's just a shame it took the team so long to realise it. A happily interesting spread of fighters from both pools made this crossover comeback a joy, as did the misheard attack cries – you just can't unhear Doom shouting 'HUMAN SPERM' on using Photon Array as a DHC attack.

CAPTAIN AMERICA: SUPER SOLDIER 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Somehow, this wasn't awful. Well, we say 'somehow', but we know exactly how – Next Level Games simply copied Rocksteady's homework, but it paid off. After years of dire movie tie-ins, a half-decent one felt like a breath of fresh air and as much as it may have simply echoed the *Arkham* games, there are far worse games to try and emulate. Especially since, amazingly, others were still getting superhero games wrong.







THOR: GOD OF THUNDER 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Yeah, exactly like this, actually. Batman, Cap and even Wolverine had hinted at a new golden age of comic characters done right, but it was not to be. This is as generic and by-numbers as a licensed game can possibly be, although it'd be remiss to overlook WayForward's DS version here – a totally different (and way better… WayBetter?) game, it's the only version we could actually stand to recommend.





ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3 2011

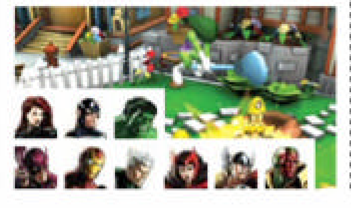
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

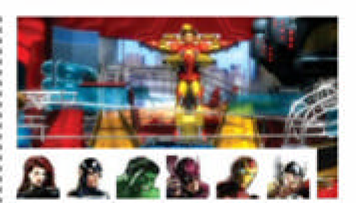
Within the space of a year, Capcom was back with even more fighting silliness. Playable Galactus was a plus, as was the new intentionally game-breaking Heroes And Heralds mode, but it was the new heroes on offer that got most players to bite. The only new Avenger was Hawkeye (who, by all accounts, is actually pretty good here) but still, it proved a solid update to an already enjoyable fighter.

MARVEL SUPER HERO SQUAD ONLINE 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

As much as it may be a child-friendly, entry-level MMO and social experience, *MSHSO* doesn't hold back when it comes to fan service. "Welcome, Squaddie," shouts Iron Man on the sign-up page. "Please provide us with information about yourself!" We're sure that the kids who are creating online armies of their favourite heroes are having a great time.





ZEN PINBALL 2 2012

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

As well as putting out a Marvel-themed standalone product, Zen's Marvel tables are all also available from the core game. The Avengers table is a highlight, with each character's ball having different properties that must be juggled and switched up when balls get locked in preparation for multi-ball chaos. The Fear Itself and Infinity Gauntlet tables are also amazing.

MARVEL AVENGERS: BATTLE FOR EARTH 2012

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

A movie tie-in for the biggest film of the year was a given, but even the early footage of the cancelled THQ game looked better than this. Seemingly based on an enhanced version of Ubi's own abysmal *PowerUp Heroes*, this Kinect (and WiiU, for some reason) brawler is just as awful as the team's other Kinect fighting efforts, such as *Fighters Uncaged* and *Fighter Within*. An ill-fitting tribute to a great movie.

SKYLANDERS MADE A BILLION DOLLARS, HUH? CUTE. IMAGINE WHAT YOU COULD DO WITH THE SAME FORMAT AND MARVEL LICENCE

MARVEL HEROES 2013

SYSTEM: PC

While it may not have been great at launch, *Marvel Heroes* has done well since by evolving in line with fan feedback and now presents a free-to-play experience that fans would do well to check out – you can always delete it if you don't get on. Free-to-play has evolved greatly in the last few years, so it's really nice to see fan service games such as this reflect the climate rather than that ability to simply separate fans from cash.

LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES 2013

SYSTEM: VARIOUS



You need look no further than the *Lego* games for examples of how to fan service right, and *Lego Marvel* proved to be an accidental launch highlight for the new consoles on account of how right TT Games got scale. Most fan favourites made the cut and gameplay evolved in line with the super-powered nature of the stars, making this arguably the best *Lego* game to date.

DISNEY INFINITY: MARVEL SUPER HEROES 2014

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Skylanders made a billion dollars, huh? Cute. Imagine what you could do with the same format and the Marvel license. Only you don't have to imagine, because it's a real thing that actually happened – Disney's smart use of comic properties (along with the expected classic IPs) made this Marvel-centric sequel interesting to explore, not least because the collection of unlockables and items offered even more ways to enjoy some all-time classics.



Interstate '76™

BEHIND THE SCENES

INTERSTATE '76

The funk is back! 1997's Interstate '76 combined addictive driving and shooting gameplay with a funky Seventies vibe. games™ guns its engine and sets out to get the lowdown on the title from publisher Activision's own development team

Released: 1997
Format: Windows
Publisher: Activision
Key Staff: Zachary Norman (original concept, designer and writer), Sean Vesce (director), Dan Stanfill (lead programmer), Scott Krager (producer), Kelly Walker Rogers (music production), Arion Salazar (music and music production)

ZACHARY 'ZACK' NORMAN has always been an ideas man. At the tender age of 21 he inspired his father, scriptwriter Marc Norman, with a proposal for a movie that would – eventually – become a worldwide smash. "My father wrote and produced *Shakespeare In Love*," says Norman proudly, "which won Best Picture and Screenplay Oscars." Colour **games™** impressed. But that's not all there is to this talented man from California. "In 2008 I set the land-speed record for an electric motorcycle on my Harley Davidson RE-VOLT at Bonneville Salt Flats, Utah. That was pretty cool." In between these achievements, Norman also helped create an iconic and funky PC vehicular shooter, which as you have probably worked out is the actual main topic of our conversation with the Californian.

"I'd been hired a few years earlier into the Los Angeles studio of Activision," he begins, "mainly to work as a writer on *MechWarrior 2: The Clans*." The famous software company had recently moved to Los Angeles under the guidance of CEO Bobby Kotick, who was looking to build a library of products amalgamating videogames and Hollywood. "I was hired because at the time I was a screenwriter, and he [Kotick] wanted a cinematic take on the game experience," remembers Norman. "I worked with Sean Vesce and Dan Stanfill on that team and became so active as a writer/designer that they eventually changed my title to game designer."

MechWarrior 2 was an outstanding hit for Activision; after combining so successfully, Norman and Vesce decided it would be a good idea to continue their working relationship. "We thought it would be great to take the *MechWarrior 2* engine and repurpose it to a new game," explains Norman. "So we started brainstorming as to the types of games we might want to do." Having always had an interest in cars, Norman was at the time mulling over whether to purchase a classic Sixties muscle car. "I don't recall the exact moment of inspiration," he says, "but I think it probably went something like this: 'Hey Sean, what if we made a game about muscle cars with guns on them?'" Norman presumably assumed that Vesce's fist-pumping-esque reaction of 'F**k yeah, sounds like a plan!' was a positive reaction to his idea…

Having worked on *MechWarrior 2*, Vesce was indeed enthused with his colleague's idea. "Zack and I were both deeply into PC sims at the time, but thought most of them were too serious and lacked soul," he says. "It wasn't long before we had a basic pitch for 'car combat in the Seventies' – a kinda love letter to Steve Jackson's *Car Wars* and *Starsky & Hutch*. We were both also huge fans of action TV shows and Blaxploitation films of the Seventies. And, of course, we loved funk music." The two men then got to work creating the alternate universe which they felt was necessary for the concept to make sense. "It was a way to logically take late-Sixties and early-Seventies muscle cars and mount weapons systems on them," notes Norman, who then had the job of

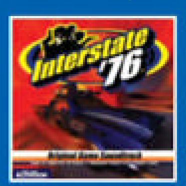

Zack Norman, designer of *Interstate '76*.


Groove's sister is chased down in the opening cut-scene.

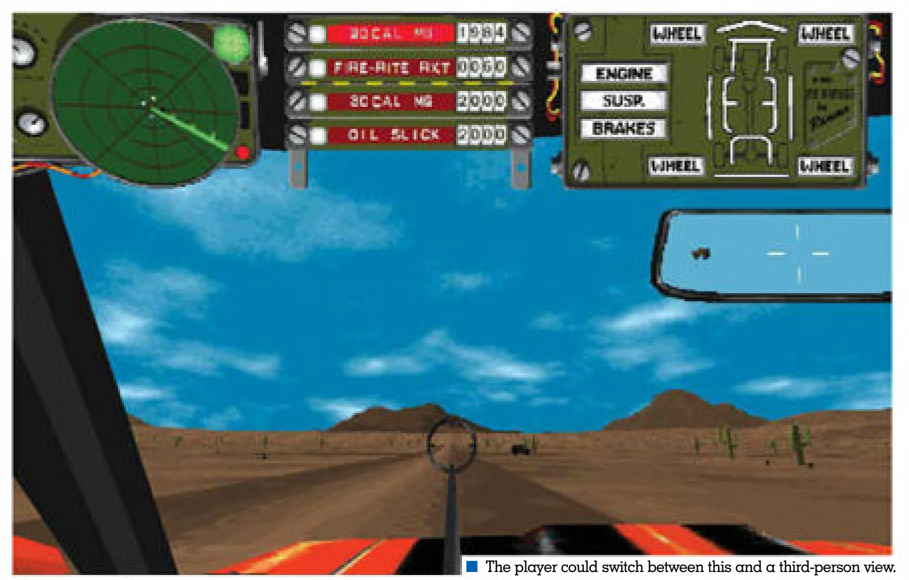
FUNKIN' THE PLACE UP



Breaking down Interstate '76's vibrant tunes



■ **AS FANS OF** soul and funk music, it was inevitable that Vesce and Norman would insist on a suitably Seventies-flavoured soundtrack when creating *Interstate '76*. "We owe all the success of the soundtrack to one man: Kelly Rogers." says Norman. Working at Activision, Rogers had plentiful contacts within the music scene that enabled him create a complete band, purely for the purpose of providing the game's iconic soundtrack. The group comprised of Arion Salazar (who would later go on to achieve fame as a founding member of Third Eye Blind) on bass guitar, Tom Coster on keyboards and drummer Bryan Mantia. The soundtrack was available on the game disc (via Redbook audio) and also as an album, sensibly released by Activision. Highlights include the catchy 'Vigilante Shuffle'; the forlorn 'Tulip Waltz' (complete with languid saxophone) and, of course, the staccato *Interstate '76* theme.



■ The player could switch between this and a third-person view.



■ "Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

selling the concept to the Activision suits. On this, Vesce says: "One of the things that made all the difference in getting the game greenlit was Zack's incredible writing ability. He developed the characters, rich backstory and really brought the universe to life. His enthusiasm was infectious."

Interstate '76's plot, while entirely fictional, has a ring of the real world to it. 'The economy is in the throes of a deep recession,' begins the ominous introduction. 'Flames of riot rule the cities. Gas is expensive and scarce. Crime is rampant. No one seems to care. This is a time for vigilantes.' Into this grim scenario enters dirt-track racer Groove Champion with his 425-horsepower '72 Picard Piranha, complete with a brace of roof-mounted 50-calibre M60 machine guns and a flame thrower. After its scene-setting vision of urban decay, the preamble introduces us to Jade 'Vixen' Champion, an auto-vigilante and sister of Groove. While investigating an army of auto-villains that is being assembled by a shadowy and unknown character, Jade is murdered. Her final wish to her partner Taurus is as clear as it is plaintive: 'Find my brother. Tell him.' And so Groove Champion sets out to avenge his sister and defeat the clan of road killers. "Creatively I was influenced heavily by comic books such as *Watchmen*, a universe that looks like ours, but has different historical events," says Norman. In order to accentuate this point, the designer ensured every element of the *Interstate '76* universe had a real world counterpart. "For example, the Ford Motor Company is Phaedra Motors, Chevrolet is Courcheval and even the tractor company John Deere is represented in our world as Dear John. I like the idea of taking our world and twisting it ever so slightly, so that if you squint or don't pay attention, you might miss that it's different at all."

■■■ AS MENTIONED ABOVE, Activision's *MechWarrior* engine proved to be the basis of *Interstate '76*, albeit in a modified form. "We quickly realised that we wanted to do more than what the engine was capable of," admits Norman, "so we had to rewrite large sections of it. Having said that, this was a time before any kind of hardware acceleration, so every renderer was a custom endeavour." Norman felt it was important to embrace these restraints rather than combat them. "One of the limitations was that it would be challenging to render anything in the world with a high degree of fidelity. So we decided to render it all the same



■ Binoculars were useful, but dangerous at high speeds.





[Interstate '76] delivers some GREAT music, some baaaad plot twists, some far-out graphics, and some good action. Unfortunately, certain design flaws throw a bummer vibe into the operation

GameRevolution, May 2004



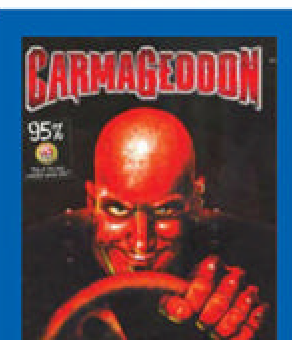


Another one bites the Badlands dust.

way, thus unifying the experience." The result was a distinctive set of cut scenes, that although rendered by animators, looked like they could have been created by the simulation itself. "We did this to even out the experience and make every aspect of the game part of one cohesive and creative work," says Norman. In other words, make the player feel like they were starring in their own Seventies TV show or movie. But naturally, with such a large and ambitious project, the occasional hiccup was inevitable. "I'm not an engineer, and my hat is off to Dan [Stanfill] and the rest of the team who were creating the technology to bring this world to life," says Norman. "I did my part to help alleviate technical issues creatively, such as setting the game in the West Texas Badlands; I knew we would want to avoid urban areas so as to limit the polygon counts. Yet there were constantly issues; high-end PC design is always mercurial." Like many games, what was occurring under the bonnet, to ensure the player had as smooth and immersive an experience as possible, often went unnoticed. Norman recalls, "I remember Dan spent hours and hours perfecting the spring rates on the suspension of the cars. The simulation of the vehicle suspension and steering needed to be accurate as a physical model so that it would behave correctly, and therefore feel right when the player is locked in combat and skidding sideways at 80 miles per hour across the desert." Despite this nod to accuracy, the profiles of the muscle cars reflected the alternate history storyline. The team, while determined not to make the vehicles cartoony or improbable, wanted the designs to be unique and evocative. "For example, they might have 16-inch rally wheels with chunky radials rather than more modern tyres," says Norman, "or they might not have the same grill, valence or bumper treatment as the original. But they were designed in such a way to take cues from the styles of the time."

ANOTHER INTEGRAL PART of *Interstate '76* was the auto-shop, an end-of-level bonus that allowed players to customise the Piranha with a variety of different weapons, as well as bolt armour onto the car. "We made the user interface look like those yellow or pink forms you fill out at the mechanic," says Norman, "and the names of the weapons were also plays on words such as the 'AIM-Nein', a send-up of the US air-to-air missile Aim-9 and bastardised German for 'aim not', a self-guiding missile." *Interstate* included a variety of weapons ranging from cannons to mines, missiles and mortars. "The weapon dynamics had more in common with a flight sim than a tank game," notes Norman, "and I did this to make the aspects of handling important. I wanted the game to feel like *The Road Warrior*; combat happens at speed and being slow meant the end." The auto-shop's options also meant players could approach the game in a number of different ways. Do you build a fast, heavy car that turns slowly, or a lightly-armoured one that can zip around bends as if they weren't there? "We even separated armour and chassis reinforcement into two different things: armour as a ballistic defence and chassis reinforcement as a crash defence. This opened up even more possibilities as the player could choose to ram enemies as tactic. And of course, this meant we could create non-ballistic weapons, such as the flamethrower, to bypass armour," grins Norman.

I WANTED VERY BADLY FOR IT TO BECOME A FEATURE FILM BECAUSE THE GAME WAS HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY CINEMA



CONTROVERSIAL COMPETITION

Released around the same time as Interstate '76 was a certain other vehicle-based game…

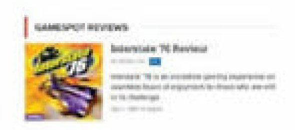
"WE DEFINITELY HAD our eye on *Carmageddon*," says Sean Vesce cautiously, "but it was a very different beast." Stainless Software's violent vision of road-based anarchy caught the gaming world by surprise and, fuelled by the controversy around its gameplay, became a predictable best-seller. "The main gameplay, as I remember, was racking up points for running over pedestrians," continues Vesce, "which sounded like fun – but we had higher aspirations for storytelling and simulation."

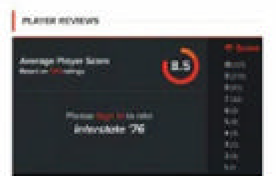
Despite *Carmageddon* holding more in common with *Interstate*'s console iteration, *Vigilante 8*, it's hard to imagine the game's runaway success not having an effect on *Interstate '76*'s sales.





WHAT THEY SAID...





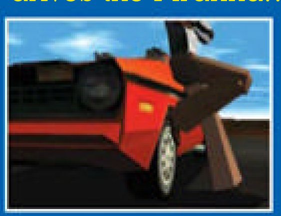
Interstate '76 is an incredible gaming experience and offers countless hours of enjoyment for those who are willing to face up to its challenge

GameSpot, April 1997



GROOVE CHAMPION AND THE PICARD PIRANHA

We make the mistake of asking Zack Norman why Groove only drives the Piranha…



"COME ON MAN, it's a TV show! Did Magnum ever drive anything but the 308GTS? Did Hannibal drive anything else but the A-Team van? Groove doesn't drive anything else either. Think of it this way: I wanted to create the notion of auto-vigilantism, built around the comic book heroes that I grew up reading about. When you think of Groove, Jade and Taurus as superheroes, their cars are their costumes, their vigilante identity. The way they paint their cars and the way they fight are as much as who they are as their name, or their clothing."

Interstate '76 was styled as a Seventies-style television show. The brilliant intro scene (which sees Groove Champion's sister chased down and murdered) sets the scene perfectly for the game itself. "If you look at the intro credits, the names of the characters are played by virtual actors who themselves were virtual constructs," reveals Norman. "So for example, Groove Champion was played by Everett Man, who we intended to be used in other Activision games." The characters themselves were spookily devoid of facial features. "I met with Tim Miller at Blur Studios and asked him how we could optimise the game in order to include more story. We came to the realisation that if we chose to cut the requirement to animate mouths and other facial structures, we could put that animation time into telling the story – and that was what was important to all of us."

DESPITE MOSTLY POSITIVE reviews, there was a sprinkling of dissenting voices upon *Interstate '76*'s release. "I felt we broke a lot of new ground creatively. We had an African-American protagonist and a uniquely differentiated creative take that was far more sophisticated than many games of the day," notes Norman, while admitting the game deserved some of its criticism. "I found the gameplay was extremely fun but the engine's rendering capabilities were probably a little behind by the time the game was released." Perhaps influenced by the re-used engine, sales of *Interstate* were lukewarm. "It didn't sell that great," admits Norman. "I think we all wanted it to be a bigger hit than it was, but it didn't sell anything close to *MechWarrior 2*." Sean Vesce recalls the pressure the team was under. "We never managed to get enough time to polish the game, and back then there was no robust process for play testing. We had some difficulty spikes where players needed to reduce the weight of their car in order to win the race. A lot of fans mention that, particularly with mission four."

THERE WERE CONSTANTLY ISSUES; HIGH-END PC DESIGN IS ALWAYS MERCURIAL

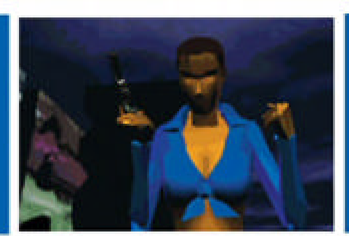
At various points the player has to perform dangerous stunts to proceed.

Given its roots, it was apt that the movie rights to *Interstate '76* were acquired by 20th Century Fox in 1998. Norman was actively involved in the sale, although it is likely by now that the rights have elapsed. "I wanted very badly for it to become a feature film because the game was heavily influenced by cinema. I was inspired by Seventies movies such as *Airport '79* and *The Towering Inferno*, as well as TV. If you play the game again, you'll notice TV show-type cues in the intro section, and in the way we shot the cut-scenes." We can't make up our mind whether *Interstate '76* would be better as a movie, telling the simple, yet evocative revenge tale of Groove Champion, or a TV programme, unfolding a series of vignettes based around the violent highway. Either way, we reckon it would be pretty awesome. "But I will say this," proclaims Norman, "Knowing what I know now about how to create modern entertainment software – today I would make what *Interstate* really should have been back then." We sense some regrets from the designer. "We didn't have access to third-party games engines which meant we got bogged down by what I call 'nuts and bolts' engineering," says Norman, "and as a result we couldn't focus on a lot of the detail we wanted to include." One early concept that Norman wanted was the ability for the player to leave their car, in what sounds a lot like *Grand Theft Auto* set in the Seventies. "I wanted to do a lot more with the characters outside

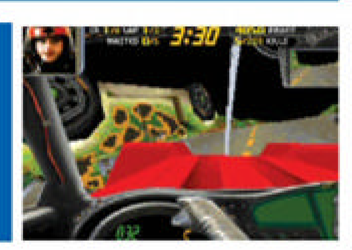
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Quarantine > Interstate '76 > Carmageddon



Gametek's *Quarantine* established the first-person car-based shooter genre that *Interstate* would go on to perfect.



Carmageddon tossed it all out of the window in favour of pure destruction and violence when it picked up *Interstate*'s torch.



of the cars. We wanted to embrace a lot of action on foot where the player took care of certain aspects of the missions in a first-person-shooter type mode. Unfortunately we could tell early on that we wouldn't be able to do that." Norman's solution was to invent a creative trope within the game that went some way towards explaining why the characters never left their vehicles. "There's an awesome scene at the end of the game with the main bad guy, Malachio, trapped under the dashboard of a burning car," he remembers. "He begs for his life to Groove, to which he replies, 'Never get out of the car.' That part of the game's vernacular was my Band-Aid over what I thought was a hole in the design of the game."



Level one and Groove shadows Taurus en route to their destination.

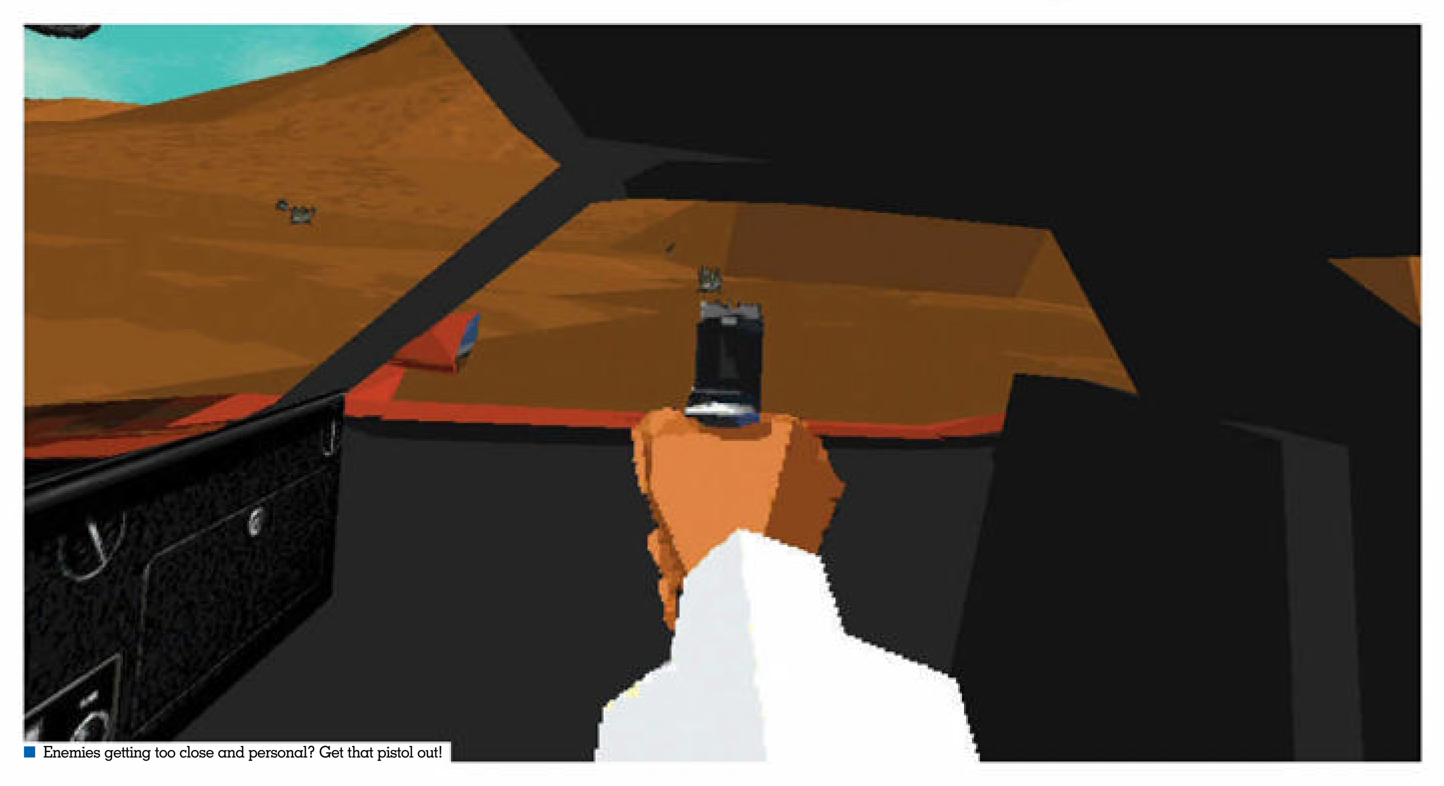
But we end, as tradition dictates, with how the two men look back at their time on *Interstate '76* today. "We wanted the game to be like a breath of fresh air," says Vesce, "and to make something novel, yet fun – something people would remember. I think the cool thing about it was this crazy mash-up of high-action car combat and vehicle customisation, combined with a rich narrative and world." Norman recalls: "I am so proud of what we built. People come up to me today and tell me it was one of their favourite games ever. I think it touched people very deeply and brought so much fun to the core group of users who loved it. But I can never have a budget big enough to tell a story. There's a whole universe of auto-villains and auto-vigilantes in my head, dying to get out…" Sean Vesce still feels today that working on *Interstate '76* had a profound effect on him. "It was an inspiring project to be a part of, and we worked hard to seamlessly blend the story with deep gameplay. I still get stopped today at conferences by people saying thanks for making it. It's a shame they never got anywhere with the film rights. It would have made a great movie!"



Weird clouds over the Badlands.



Interstate '76's back cover emphasised the free-roaming nature of the gameplay.



Enemies getting too close and personal? Get that pistol out!





INTERVIEW

TIM SCHAFER

Double Fine's attention is focused on its new point-and-click adventure Broken Age, but ten years ago it was Psychonauts that was blowing minds…

Tim Schafer has one of gaming's most enviable CVs. Most developers would be happy having created the *The Secret of Monkey Island* but Tim can also note *Full Throttle, Day Of The Tentacle* and *Grim Fandango* among his incredible successes. In 2005, he added *Psychonauts* to the list, cramming new concepts into a finely honed and polished platform game collect-em-up that used psychic abilities to enter the minds of enemies in order to battle against their inner demons and fears. Dumped by Microsoft before it was released, it nevertheless remains one of Tim's most overlooked gems. Here, on the 10th anniversary of its release – and in the same month as Double Fine's new point-and-click adventure *Broken Age* is released – Tim tells us more about this sterling piece of work.

So you left LucasArts in 2000 to create Double Fine Productions.
I almost can't take credit for the idea of leaving LucasArts. Friends of mine there did a napkin map and said we should leave and make PS2 games because we could make a lot of money. I was kind of wary. I didn't want to leave because I had a sweet gig there. A lot of things were taken care of and I only had to worry about the games and making them as good as possible.

How did *Psychonauts* come about?
Psychonauts was a mutation of ideas. Some of the themes and the concepts had been in early game pitches I made at LucasArts. The idea of dreams went as far back as *Full Throttle*. I always wanted to work with interactive dreams and visions and I was interested in the idea that there are things in your head that you do not consciously know. But it's funny because someone walked into the office and said, "Tell me about that thing when you go into other people's heads", and I was like, "No, no, it is going deep into your *own* head". And I thought 'Wait, that's better; that's totally better'. Someone's misunderstanding of an early pitch helped me come up with this idea of *Psychonauts*.

Were you excited about going it alone?
We started with three people figuring out how the fax machine worked and fixed the plumbing; the basic stuff that seems romantic when you are starting out a company and you're in a warehouse and there's no heat and it's awesome. It doesn't seem that romantic when you are at crunch, though.

> AT FIRST I WAS TRYING TO GO WITH A CHARLIE BROWN KIND OF THING WITH REAL KIDS

Did you prefer being in control?
LucasArts was a great place to work, with tons of super talented people. It was a unique company with an amazing ranch and we got so much attention so it was a safe place to be. But it had to make *Star Wars* games and make money for George. I wanted to work on original projects and control how the team was treated.

Why did *Psychonauts* take five years?
You know the saying that bumblebees shouldn't technically be able to fly if you look at



REMAKING THE ORIGINAL

"■■■ I WOULD LIKE to remake *Psychonauts* in HD but most of the original files are lost. People have had them on their machines and not checked them in. We've had people leave and their hard drive's crashed. We'd have to reanimate a lot of stuff from scratch and it would be really expensive – more than a million dollars. If we were going to do that, we think we should just make another game."



The locations were truly mind-bending, with Raz expected to battle against some bizarre enemies such as the brain-powered Blueprint Brain Tank in the Brain Tumbler Experiment.

the aerodynamics or the weight of them? If you told that to bumblebees, they'd drop to the ground simultaneously. The same was true of us. If we knew of the obstacles in the way of making *Psychonauts*, we probably wouldn't have summoned the gusto to do it. It was the first time we had made a platform game and we had junior people working on their first game. We were working with a publisher – Microsoft – that had just launched the Xbox. We were feeling this thing out.

Why make a platform game; wouldn't it have been easier to stick with what you knew?

I was inspired by 3D platform games. I liked the 3D environments of them, exploring and swimming and having fun. But I felt they were missing the depth of adventure games so I wanted to do something that felt submersive but had unusual settings and non-typical characters and a deep storyline.



How did you develop the characters?

I was trying to write a document about the various kids you see at Summer Camp, looking at their personalities, what they believed in, what their parents were like and that kind of thing. I was spending a lot of time on the social network Friendster – on which I actually met my wife – and I was like, wait a second, I'm going to make fake Friendster profiles for all of these camp kids. It helped me decide who was friends with who, what they might post on each other's walls and what pictures they may put up to represent themselves. It was really helpful.

Are back stories important?

I am a big believer in them and that's the secret I think to making characters that really stand out. But I believe in not sharing those back stories by laying them around a world in the form of books. I wanted the characters to reveal little bits and pieces of a back story as they talk.

Why have *Psychonauts*' lead character Raz run away from the circus to sneak into a summer camp packed with youngsters with psychic abilities?

I wanted to make a game about childhood where players could explore secret areas and I think wandering around the woods is something a lot of kids have fond memories of. It's timeless and doesn't age.

Was that a hallmark of your own childhood?

I remember being ten years old and exploring areas where I knew I shouldn't be. At our camp there was a bordering edge of barbed wire fence that you couldn't get over and there was a cabin down there. We'd say it was where Hatchet Mary lived – someone who hacked your parents apart – and we'd dare each other to go down there. It's an excitement about going where you are not supposed to go and crossing a line. It was something we tried to capture in the summer camp of *Psychonauts*.

THE LONG GAME

> IT WAS ALWAYS a bummer to see *Psychonauts* in the list of the top five games that you didn't play. It was seen as a flop but in the early days it sold 400,000 and on digital distribution it kept selling. When we got the rights back, we put it on Steam and included achievements. It started to sell again. It's not a game that nobody played but it's one that needed the longevity that digital distribution could provide.

***Psychonauts* drew on your past adventure games as well, though, didn't it?**

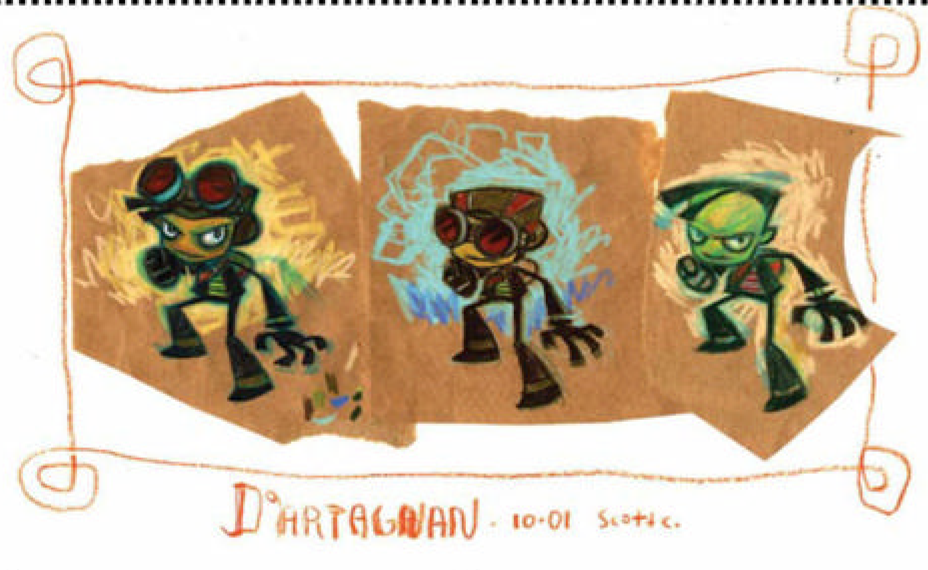
We had dialogue trees, an inventory and straight-up puzzles. It was how I knew how to make a game. But I also drew on life, so we had paranoid milkmen and bacon and stuff like that. The idea for bacon came from a story someone told me about getting rid of tapeworm. If there is a worm in your stomach or your intestines and – sorry, this is gross – you hold a piece a bacon in front of your open mouth and the smell of the bacon will get to the worm. You'll see its head popping up at the back of your throat so you grab it and pull it out. I thought it was so funny that bacon is so delicious that even a tape worm can't resist it. Ford Cruller couldn't resist it either.

A stand-out part of the game was the excellent voice acting by Richard Horowitz, who played Raz. Why choose him?

At first I was trying to go with a Charlie Brown kind of thing with real kids. We had some come in and read out some lines but they didn't have the right acting experience. With Richard we could say, "Okay, can you do it again but a bit faster because you don't know the bad guys is bad yet?" and he would say "Gotcha", and do it about eight different ways. Some little kids can't change their performance and often just read it the same way again. Yet Richard had this hilarious audition tape. He's one of those guys who is always changing his voice, like Robin Williams. It was great to have him.



One of *Psychonauts*' major strengths was its vibrant characterisation. Here we see Jasper Rolls, the inner critic of insane actress Gloria Von Gouton.



And the soundtrack was the fine work of Peter McConnell, who you had worked with for years…
He worked on *Money 2* and *Day Of The Tentacle* – he wrote the theme for that. We called him in for *Psychonauts* and he did an amazing job. He has also been involved with *Broken Age*.

You have said before that *Psychonauts* came out at the wrong time, when the market had changed. Do you stick with that?
Yes, it was very near the end of the Xbox life cycle. The reason it got cancelled at Microsoft was because they were not going to fund any more Xbox games from the start of 2005 because they were bringing out the Xbox 360. We came out in February that year. I was like, "We're two months, just two months over that year" but it was just a little too late.

Was that a stressful time?
We had the company riding on it. It was our only game and to think it could all come crashing down would have been a waste. Nobody would have seen it. It would have just disappeared and I would have retired from games. It would have been devastating.

Did you really think of quitting?
No. [laughs] When I get on track with something, I see it through. I made that game and I put so much into it that I would not have accepted any possibility of not finishing it. It's like with *Broken Age*. Three years in the making and I'm sure some people thought that we had stopped working on it but no, we're just about done.

Was it touch and go?
We were so close to the end of our money. I made an announcement to the company at one point that we were shutting down and that Wednesday's pay check would be the last one. Then two weeks of money came in from a random source and we signed with Majesco so it worked out. When you are really dependent on a publisher for your future, it can be very dicey.

IF WE KNEW OF THE OBSTACLES IN THE WAY, WE PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT

Looking back on it all, would you have done things differently?
Yeah. We didn't know what we were doing at the time. The fact it was good was because we kept plugging away and learning. The levels took a lot of designing and redesigning and for a long time it wasn't fun to play. It had crazy backgrounds but the character didn't feel right because we hadn't emphasised Raz enough. At some point we got a task force together of people from every discipline to look at Raz and how he felt and played. We looked at how Raz grabbed ladders and tightropes and how he walked and how he stopped walking, how he turned and stuff like that. I think the big lesson was to do that first before you do the rest of the game.

Some dismissed *Psychonauts* as a children's game, didn't they?
Day Of The Tentacle had the same problem. We got a call once from Steven Spielberg who wanted a hint for his son Max. The first thing he said was it was great that we made games for kids. I wanted to say, "Ahh, it's a fun game for kids to play in that it doesn't have bad content in it – except for microwaving your hamster and stuff – but it's not *just* for kids". I've just always been drawn to cartoon-like humour, and stylised artistic visuals. I grew up with *Ren & Stimpy* and Warner Bros cartoons. They always had adult content. I just assumed everyone loved that kind of thing too.

Will you ever make a sequel?
Yes. I think the time has to be right and we have to have access to the right kind of money. It has to live up to the first game.

In 2012, *Minecraft* creator Markus Persson tweeted that he would fund a sequel. What happened there?
It was a nice offer but I think the actual price tag of what it would cost was not what he was expecting. The first game cost $13m, so not exactly cheap. It was an exciting moment and I would still like to do it. But he's probably got plenty of people asking for money.

Are you surprised at the cult following?
Of course not, it's awesome [laughs].

Do you feel vindicated for having made the move, then?
[laughs] Yes. Vindicated. I win. [laughs]



■ *Broken Age Act 2* is Double Fine's latest release, continuing the recent path of making smaller games packed with character.

GAME CHANGERS

THE SIMS

Released: 31 March, 2000 **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** Maxis **System:** PC

EA originally only planned to sell 160,000 units of *The Sims* – it actually sold 100 times more than that: 16 million units.

Who'd have thought that a simulation based on your mundane duties in real life could be so fun? Well, EA and Maxis, it turns out. The Sims became one of the biggest PC games ever made…

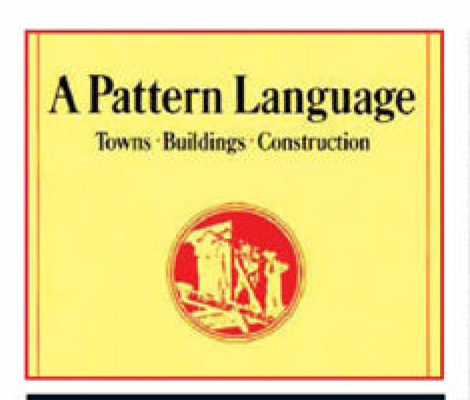
WHAT WOULD YOU do if your house burnt down – if all your possessions were taken away and you had to rebuild your life? For designer Will Wright, the answer to that question was simple: make a game out of it.

After the Oakland firestorm of 1991 destroyed all of Wright's possessions, the designer was inspired to create a virtual dollhouse to try and share his experience with the world.

A year later, Wright – who had previously worked on *SimCity*, *SimEarth* and *SimAnt* – pitched the idea of an architectural design game (then called *Home Tactics*) to Maxis, a company he co-founded, but the board of directors wasn't wholly enthused by the idea. Yet when EA bought out the studio in 1997, Wright's daydream got a second chance. EA wanted to rebrand the game to fit in with Wright's already-successful brand and work on the product could start.

THE ANATOMY OF THE SIMS

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO LEARN ABOUT THE RIDICULOUSLY IN-DEPTH LITERATURE AND THEORY THAT WENT INTO MAKING THE SYSTEMS THE SIMS RUNS ON…



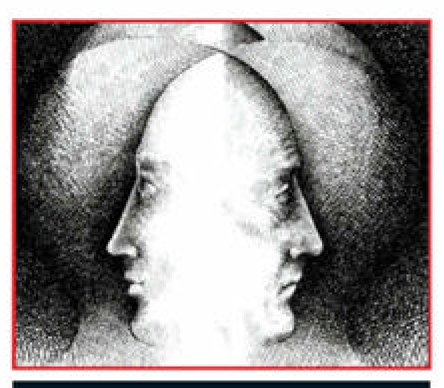
A PATTERN LANGUAGE

★ Written in 1977, this book outlines the importance of people's own designs on the spaces they inhabit: houses, communities and so on. Wright included many of the principles in *The Sims*' world-building tools.



ABRAHAM MASLOW

★ The American psychologist is famous for thinking up the 'hierarchy of needs'; a pyramid-based system that leads to self-actualisation. Wright applied this model to his Sims' morale and happiness systems.



MAPS OF THE MIND

★ Charles Hampden-Turner's *Maps Of The Mind* charts and conceptualises the mind and its processes in a flowchart-like way, and was the foundation for the artificial intelligence that powers the Sims.

From such personal and humble beginnings grew a giant – one of the first truly mainstream games of the new millennium. *The Sims* was massive – it would run on most families' home computers, it had universal appeal, and nothing quite like it had ever existed at the time. It was peculiar – when Wright first pitched the game, the Maxis board claimed 'no-one wanted to play with a virtual doll's house […] because that was for girls, and girls don't play games'. EA had more foresight than that, though, and it's thanks to *The Sims* that a lot of younger players in the Noughties, both male and female, had their first experience with videogames.

According to EA's figures, female players make up approximately 60 per cent of *The Sims*' playerbase. While its immediate impact wasn't necessarily felt, we'd like to hope it woke up many in the industry to the fact that women were actually playing their games, as much as they may have ignored them.

■■■ The reason *The Sims* became so popular – and got so very quickly – comes down to three core design tenets; first, the game is practically unwinnable – there are no conditions for victory, no goal can really be achieved. As such, *The Sims* enjoys practically infinite replay value – it's a game about keeping your Sims on the right track, interfering with lite-AI elements and, basically, playing God.

THE GAME IS PRACTICALLY UNWINNABLE… AS SUCH, THE SIMS ENJOYS INFINITE REPLAY VALUE

Second, the game includes an advanced architecture system – thanks to its original shape as *Home Tactics* – and can be used as an educational tool. There are people on the **games**™ team that actually went on to read architecture at University thanks to initial exposure to architectural theory in its simplest form in *The Sims*. The game managed to make learning fun for kids – something that you can't really put a price on.

Third, the game became a psychological phenomenon; various sects of players began to evolve from the initial playerbase. A hardcore audience grew almost instantly, forming a very strong community that's still alive and well today, while other players discovered darker sides to themselves and ended up enacting sadistic and violent acts upon their own creations.

Because of how simply the diametrically presented in-game assets looked and handled and interacted with the 3D models of *The Sims* themselves, people began to project their own lives into their avatars. At its core, whether you torture the little guys or not, *The Sims* is wish fulfilment, and it's presented in such an interactive way that we can create entire narratives – establish entire universes – within the toolbox Maxis gives us. Combined with a gentle visual experience and the soft 'Simlish' muzak that played constantly, *The Sims* was seen as a therapeutic tool as much as it was a videogame.

KEY FACTS

- Two years after its original release, *The Sims* had sold over 11.3 million copies worldwide, easily surpassing the best-selling PC game ever at that point, *Myst*.
- *The Sims* licence was picked up by Hollywood in 2007, but script issues have prevented any actual progress on a cinematic adaptation of it.
- Lead designer of *The Sims*, Will Wright, was a *Robot Wars* champion and is an active space-flight enthusiast.
- Prior to approval, some at Maxis apparently referred to it as 'The Toilet Game'.



GAME CHANGERS

8 MORE GAMES TO INSPIRE YOUR INNER SADIST

THE SIMS MAY HAVE BEEN MADE WITH DOLLHOUSE RELAXATION IN MIND, BUT BURNING, DROWNING AND MURDERING SIMS WAS A COMMON PASTIME. IT MADE US THINK ABOUT ALL THOSE OTHER TIMES WE'VE BEEN TRULY AWFUL TO OUR CHARACTERS…



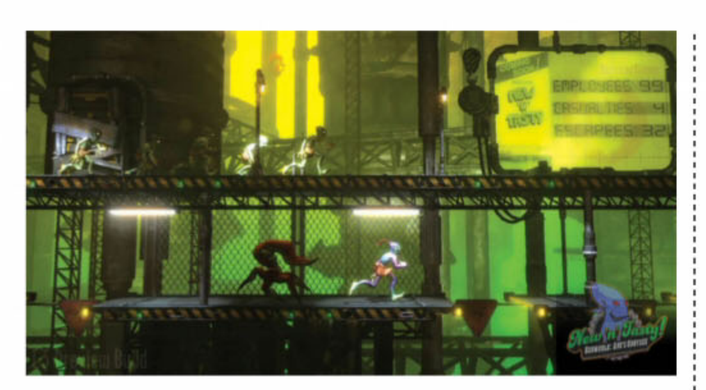
SHOOTING NATALYA IN GOLDENEYE

■ NATALYA IS AN infuriating nuisance in Rare's game-changing shooter. She gets in the way of your rather dangerous gunfire, or finds it *hilarious* to stand in doorways and block you off. On the upside, she's a true bullet sponge. How many times can you shoot her before it's game over? For us, testing her durability became a large part of the game.



SLAPPING WOLVERINE

■ *DEADPOOL* IS ALL about chaos, and it's the most realised when you crash the X-Men's airship, rendering the rest of the cast unconscious. There's an achievement for slapping Wolverine 50 times, but we must have continued for a good half hour, laughing at the nonsense Deadpool spouted on each hit. "That's for being so ugly. That's for being so beautiful. That's because *I felt like it*."



MISLEADING MUDOKONS

■ IN THE ORIGINAL *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*, we were appalled to find ourselves directing fellow Mudokons into meat grinders, into mines, or into bottomless pits. Once we 'accidentally' electrocuted one of the meat puppets to death, we knew we couldn't get the good ending, so we had fun using the fools as meat shields… the usual.



FEEDING LARA TO THE WOLVES

■ THE POINT OF the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, we're sure, was for us to empathise with Lara. The intention wouldn't have been for us to find everything that can kill Lara, just to see what it does. 'Will I die if I leap off this cliff?' Yes. 'Will this suspicious trip-wire cause something to crush me?' Yes. 'Will this wolf tear off my face?' Oh yes.



SACRIFICING YOUR SPOUSE

■ THE CENTRE POINT of this *Fable II* temple is a giant device titled The Wheel Of Unholy Misfortune – a torture machine you could use to sacrifice civilians in order to curry favour with the dark lord. Kill enough people and you can collect the most powerful weapon in the game… but only if you offer up our husband or wife first.



PUTTING DOWN THE SURVIVORS

■ *DEAD RISING 2* had two primary objectives – find a cure for your daughter and rescue a slew of abandoned survivors. Thing is, those survivors are whiny idiots – some don't get on, some wander off, and they're universally dumb. We enjoying feeding them to the zombies, using them as bait so we could get further into the city complex.



HARVESTING LITTLE GIRLS FOR DRUGS

■ WE NEVER THOUGHT we'd write that headline. But thanks to Ken Levine and *BioShock*, here we are. We assume Levine wanted players to avoid harvesting the kids for precious Adam, but we're pragmatists – we knew harvesting would provide us with more of the magical juice, and what's one girl's life when compared to, let's say, having bees living in your arms?



PLAYING TURRETS OFF

■ WE NEVER THOUGHT it was possible to have an emotional attachment to a turret, but Valve humanised the automated killing machines and made them adorable. That didn't stop us setting the things to attack each other, though, laughing at their cutesy death cries and empty threats. When we dropped one on top of another, destroying them both… that's when we were thinking with portals.



BEST INTRO

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
SONIC TEAM [SEGA]
SEGA GENESIS/MASTER SYSTEM **1991**

ALONG WITH A funky, attention-grabbing soundtrack (something that would go on to be a steady *Sonic* trope), the opening screen of the very first *Sonic The Hedgehog* perfectly summed up what Sega was gunning for with the *Sonic* franchise; Sonic's furrowed brow, cheeky smirk and gentle finger wag showed attitude and captured his personality straight away, while the scrolling background showed the parallax 16-bit graphics in all their tropical splendour – evoking feelings of escaping, holidaying. The clear Sega logo, amongst the stars and stripes (and wings) of the splash screen, was designed to appeal to a distinctly American audience – and if the success of the first four *Sonic* games is anything to go by, it worked.


TM

ESSENTIALS

10 LUDICROUS GAMING FOODSTUFFS

We've been playing quite a lot of the *Final Fantasy XV* demo this month, and there's one thing that's held our attention above all else – the food. When Ignis Stupeo Scientia starts cooking those Behemoth steaks, our mouths water every time. To celebrate this new wave of photorealistic food, we've gathered the most ludicrous foods of gaming's past in an effort to stave off that virtual hunger just a *tiny* bit longer…



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Vanillite's Evolutionary Chain
Game: Pokémon Black/White
Texture: Creamy

1 For *Pokemon Black* and *White*, producer Junichi Masuda once told us that he 'took his team to the zoo' to search for inspiration. The games required a whole new collection of Pokémon for the main quest, and the folks at Game Freak needed some live experience to help them research new monster designs. We can only imagine that one designer got the wrong end of the stick and began to sketch eyes and a mouth on to the refreshing snack a fellow Game Freak-er had bought at some local ice cream stand… how else could the Vanillite evolutionary line have come to be? All three Pokémon are just ice creams with faces. That's it. That's all.

Mudokon Pops
Game: Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee
Texture: Crunchy?

2 After the Meech population was harvested to extinction by Rupture Farms (so that they could produce their best-selling Meech Munchies), the board of Glukkons began to search for their next big seller. Paramite Pies were good, sure, but sales were dropping – and it was the same with the Scrab cakes, too. What were they going to do? Developer Oddworld Inhabitants knew, of course – they were going to make the Glukkons turn on their own employees and begin to harvest them, turning the already indentured workforce in Mudokon Pops – basically by decapitating them and shoving the severed heads on a stick. Yum.

The Beef Bowl Challenge
Game: Persona 4
Texture: Meaty

3 Any meal that requires your personality traits to be well above average in order to enjoy is a pretty ludicrous meal in our book. It goes without saying then, that *Persona 4*'s 'Rainy Day Challenge' dish easily makes it into our list – you have to be courageous, knowledgeable, understanding and diligent to even finish this meal. If you don't… well, the game just gets disappointed in you. You can dig and dig and dig through all that beef, but all your character will muse is that they 'begin to suspect the bowl is a portal to the Meat Dimension'. If you ask us, the 'Meat Dimension' should have been an in-game dungeon.

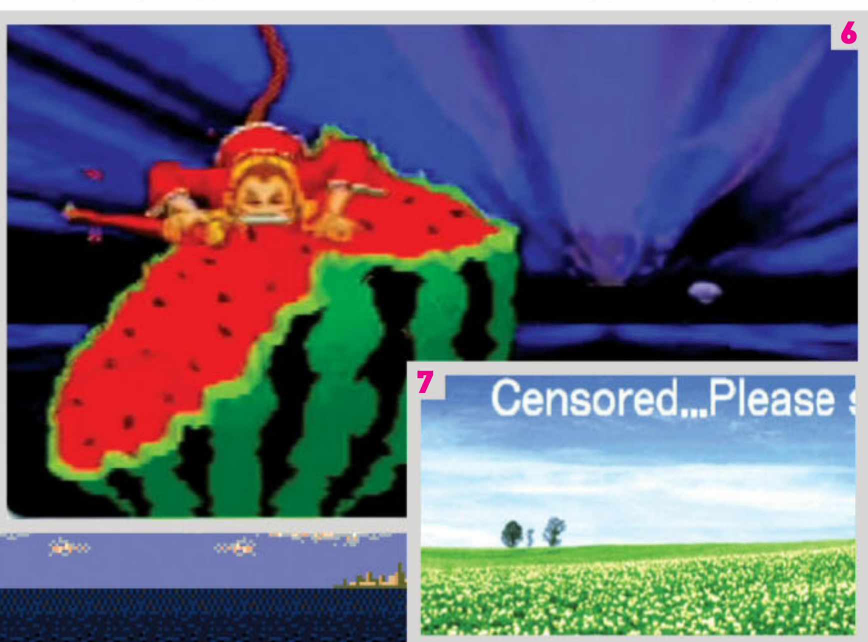
Trash Can Chicken
Game: Streets Of Rage series
Texture: Rubbish

4 Have your hunger pangs ever been so bad that you've been driven to smashing up arcade cabinets, wooden crates or even trash cans in search of a replenishing snack? No? Well in that case you're missing out – if *Streets Of Rage 2* taught us anything (and trust us, it *did*), it's that there tends to be perfectly good roast chicken just inexplicably lying around in certain receptacles out there on the street. It might not be the most sanitary food you'll ever find in the middle of a hangry rage, but hey – it's always worth eating any old poultry you happen to find lying around, right? Wait, what do you mean that's a bad idea?

Sinner's Sandwich
Game: Deadly Premonition
Texture: Confusing

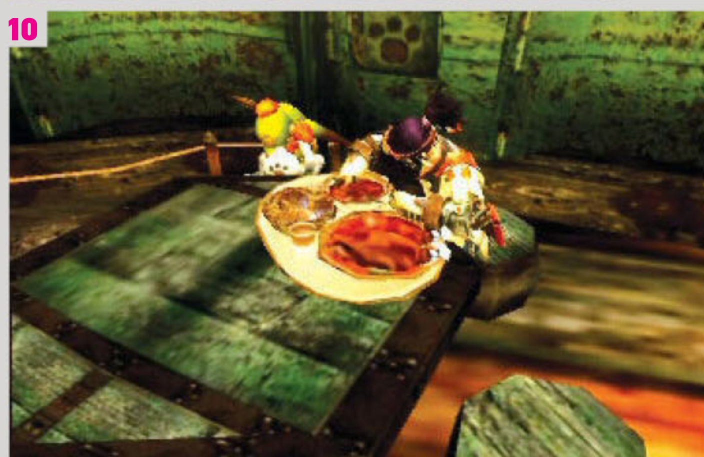
5 The A & G Diner's speciality dish, the Sinner's Sandwich is one of the most confusing items of food we've ever come across in a game… which is in keeping with *Deadly Premonition*'s entire remit, we suppose. The sandwich is described by NPC Nick Cormack as a 'self-inflicted punishment to atone for past sins' and is constructed of turkey, strawberry jam and cereal. We can't actually imagine what that must be like to eat, but *Deadly Premonition*'s protagonist didn't seem to have too many problems with it – willingly scoffing down the concoction and delighting in the taste along with fellow sinner Harry Stewart.











SonSon's Super Fruit
Game: Marvel Vs. Capcom 2
Texture: Seedy

6 Based on the Chinese mythological hero, Sun Wukong the Monkey King, SonSon is as playful and cheeky as you'd expect from a primate-like character. In *Marvel Vs. Capcom 2*, she was primarily a rushdown, character but was known for her less-than-amazing special moves. One of her Hyper combos – POW – made the enemy turn into a random fruit, which SonSon would quickly devour, spitting out a seed that the enemy would grow out of. The move did little damage, and was impossible to combo into, but ultimately looked pretty cool, and was used to showboat. SonSon could also restore allies' health with a peachy gift.

Anyone & Anything
Game: Final Fantasy VIII
Texture: Various

7 The final Guardian Force (read: Summon) you can acquire in *Final Fantasy VIII* is Eden. In and of itself, Eden isn't all that amazing, but it does allow your characters to learn one of the best moves in the game – Devour. Devour basically lets anyone eat anything, whenever they like. Eating different enemies boosts your stats (permanently!) and recovers all your health. Just make sure not to eat a Bomb – it'll blow up inside you – or an enemy that could poison you. The best bit about Devouring, though, is how the game censors it… replacing the action with one of three pretty, colourful 'censored' screens.

The Tofu Survivor
Game: Resident Evil 2
Texture: Bland

8 If you finished the whole *Resident Evil 2* campaign in under three hours, then started and finished another character's story however you like, you'd unlock The Tofu Survivor – a character created with the intention of parodying The 4th Survivor minigame that came on *Resident Evil 2*'s disc. Literally a giant walking block of tofu, The Tofu Survivor had great stamina and could really soak up the damage – which is fair, for tofu – and didn't get staggered when it was wounded. It *did* turn red when injured, though, and it also got a purple tint when poisoned. We've got no idea if Tofu is edible, and we don't want to find out, either.

Banana Bomb
Game: Worms series
Texture: Explosive

9 The soft and unassuming fruit of doom – the Banana Bomb has been a staple part of *Worms*' diet since its first appearance in the franchise some 20 years ago. The tossable weapon is basically a cluster bomb wrapped in a bright, fruity skin – chuck it towards the enemy, and it'll bounce with incredible buoyancy for as long as you've set the fuse, splitting into a group of six smaller banana shards when it times out. It's easily the best grenade in the game (well, tied with the Holy Hand Grenade of course), and the only downside is the potential for friendly fire – those mini bananas sure do pack a punch!

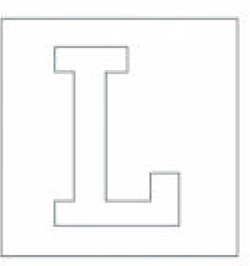
The Street Chef's Meals
Game: Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate
Texture: One of a kind

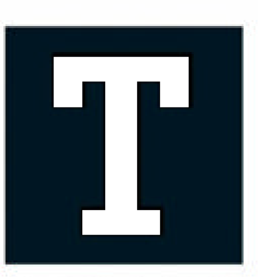
10 Did you know that by combining some freshly bottled cola (gourmet quality, of course) with some fish that was freshly caught by your pet cat – or Felyne – and consuming the results you get much better at exploring? Well, that's not strictly true – to get the most out of your fishy cola, you have to stew the ingredients together, as opposed to sautéing, steaming or frying them. The food system in the *Monster Hunter* games makes zero logical sense, but we're not complaining. Cooking is an integral part of the game, and it's kind of vital to eat these bizarre concoctions if you want to have the best stats for those specific monsters you want to hunt.











GRIFTA MORPHING GAMEPAD

MANUFACTURER: **GRIFTA** PRICE: **TBC**

THERE HAVE BEEN plenty of rumours, pretty much since the Nintendo Wii's remote gamepad was revealed back in 2005, that the other manufacturers would follow suit with a controller that could be split into component parts. But rather than wait for Sony or Microsoft to test out the idea, we have Grifta entering the fold. Having easily passed its Kickstarter goals, this morphing gamepad aims to fulfil the needs of every kind of game and make itself available on every format it can.

With kits that allow you to combine one stick for movement with a mouse for aiming (the best of console and PC gaming) or attachments to turn the Grifta into a mobile phone controller, this is an extremely versatile piece of kit. It even has the option of Grifta Antlers, add-ons that turn one half of the controller into a light gun. Very smart indeed.

Every component also appears to be available in both left and right-handed variations, so if you're a left-hander tired of having buttons and fire commands on your weaker hand, you may finally have a controller that will cater to your southpaw needs. The build quality is looking good, too, although any controller that is supposed to break apart is going to raise some concerns over its long-term durability. It will be interesting to see how the gamepad turns out once it begins reaching the mass market.



DRAGON AGE PLAYING CARDS

We had wondered whether the wonderful tarot card art of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* would make its way into the real world and thankfully it has with this pack of playing cards. Each one is adorned with a design from the game.

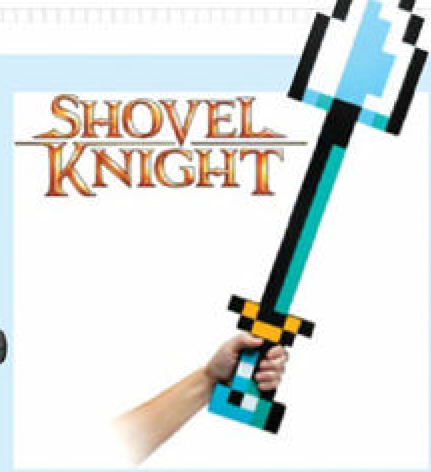
ThinkGeek.com



AVENGER REFLEX ADAPTER

We've seen these sorts of things around before and can't help but think of them as gruesome torture devices for your controller, but these Avenger adapters promise faster reaction times when competing in tense battles online.

ThinkGeek.com

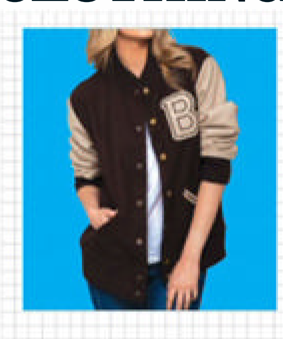


SHOVEL BLADE

This full-size replica of the Shovel Blade from the marvellous *Shovel Knight* is straight out of the *Minecraft* handbook of how to make cool merchandise from unlikely in-game items. We respect that a lot.

ThinkGeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



HOTLINE MIAMI JACKET

Inspired by the classic varsity jacket from *Hotline Miami* and nicely timed for the sequel's release, we're digging this little number from Insert Coin.
insertcoinclothing.com



WOLF ARMOUR SET

Combining a jacket and wool vest, this two-piece bit of outerwear is Musterbrand's nod to *The Witcher*, and quite fetching it is too. Cuddly-looking and just a bit menacing.
Musterbrand.com



OLD GAMER

The poor NES controller has rather been left behind by its younger, nimbler more versatile lineage, but we haven't forgotten the many years of joy it offered. It may be old, but it's certainly not forgotten by any means.
Threadless.com



PORTAL PLUSH COMPANION CUBE

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£19.99**

THERE ARE PLENTY of cuddly gaming characters out there, but some are a little less likely than others. Take for example this rather fetching and inviting Companion Cube from *Portal*. Now, we wouldn't dare say that the Companion Cube wasn't huggable, but frankly we were a little concerned about treating it with so much affection in case it stabbed us. So, having one made for hugging strike us as a gamble.
www.forbiddenplanet.com

DOOM CACODEMON PLUSH

SOLD BY: **BETHESDA** PRICE: **$15**

WOULD YOU HAVE ever described the infamous Cacodemon from *Doom* as cuddly? We certainly wouldn't and yet here it is, ready to be squished and smooshed. You'll be pleased to know that the teeth and horns have been made child safe so you don't need to worry about cutting yourself on this thing, although we won't guarantee that it doesn't spit out fireballs or something. That's up to you to discover.
store.bethsoft.com





GHOST RECON KOZAK PLUSH

SOLD BY: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£14.99**

A CUDDLY GHOST? Who asked for a cuddly member of one of Tom Clancy's most elite military units? Well, here he is and as confusing as his existence may be, he could still be useful. We imagine that intelligently deployed Kozak plushes will do well at repelling night terrors and at extracting monsters from under the bed. Not so great at stopping things from exploding though. It's Tom Clancy after all.
Amazon.co.uk



COMMODORE AMIGA: A VISUAL COMMPENDIUM

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**

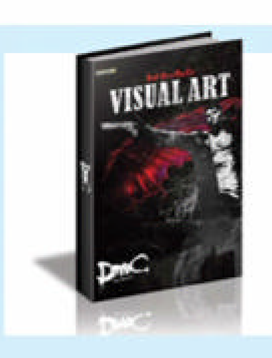
THERE'S REALLY NOTHING quite like a collection of beautifully selected and printed pixel masterpieces in a fine art book collection. It's fast becoming one of our favourite types of collections to flick through and this one is right up there. Following the similar Commodore 64 book, this Amiga collection is yet again packed with classic games, interviews, developer profiles, photography and art from the era, spanning more than 400 pages of content.

The visuals are particularly nice in this collection thanks to lithographic printing and the array of fine images selected, which really show off the Amiga in the best light possible. Games like *Alien Breed*, *The Chaos Engine*, *Flashback* and *Simon The Sorcerer* all get two-page spreads to really show off the wonderful way these simple games were rendered for the maximum impact and detail. We enjoyed *Commodore 64: A Visual Commpendium*, but frankly the improved visuals of the Amiga mean that this is a much more engaging collection and the package is an impressive one. If you're as passionate about retro gaming as we are then we're confident you'll get a kick out of flicking through this compendium (however Bitmap Books prefers to spell it). It's a fine read and is well worthy of your attention.

Funstock.co.uk



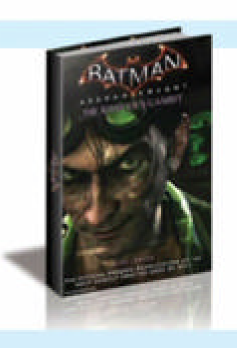
VERDICT 8/10



DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY VISUAL ART

The art that Ninja Theory produces is quite something. Perhaps the key reason for this is that its artists try to prepare genuinely artistic pieces rather than just concepts. It's why its games tend to be so textured and detailed as a result. This collection shows that off rather nicely.

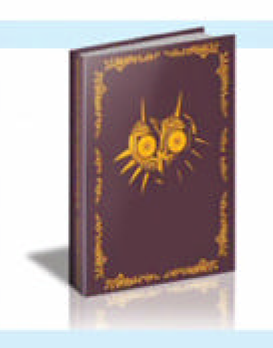
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BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT – THE RIDDLER'S GAMBIT

A preface to the events of *Batman: Arkham Knight*, you may want to read this quickly if you want to squeeze it in before the game releases. While Scarecrow bides his time, The Riddler puts the Batman and Robin through their paces.

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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK 3D STRATEGY GUIDE

This is the collector's edition hardcover for the Nintendo remake and so while older guides will get you through this game, true fans would be well advised to at least give this one a look too. The cover design alone makes it worth a peek.

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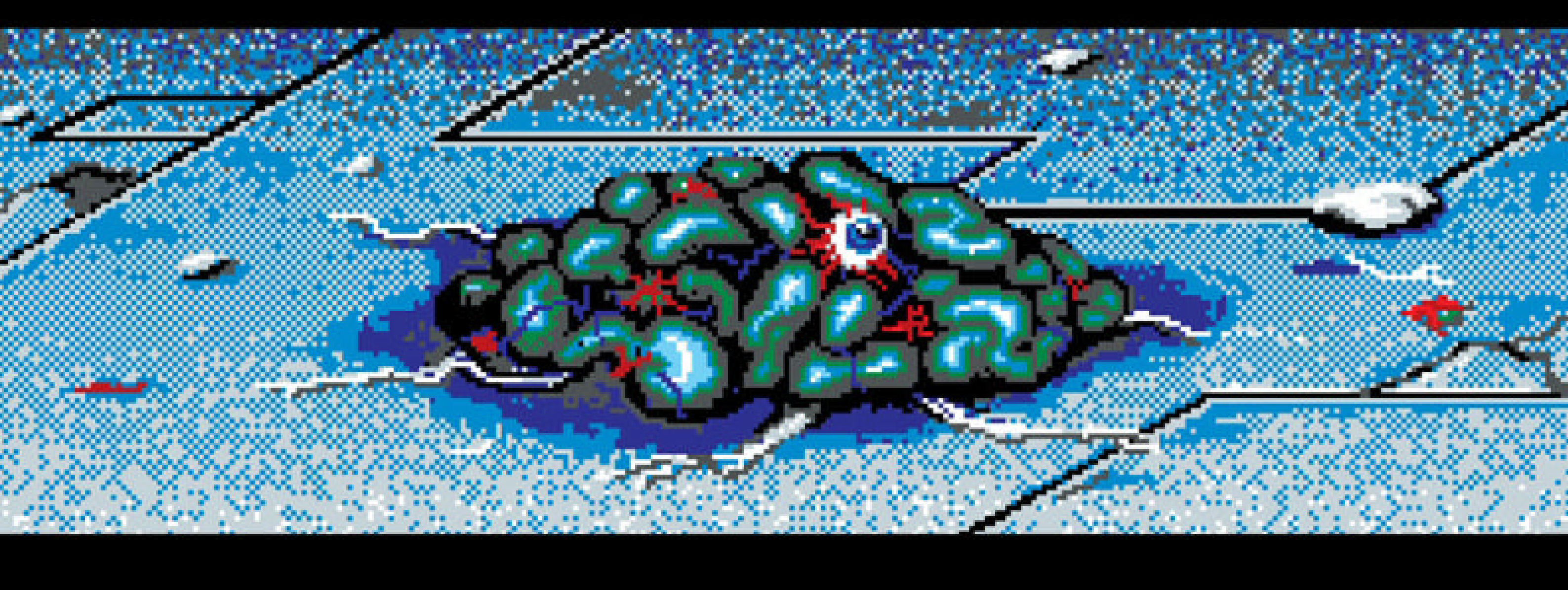
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